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‘Deepathoon’ not Hindu pillar, Jains used it: TN

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BUSINESS

Wholesale price inflation at -0.32% in November

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SPORTS

2 Hazare games must for all players, not just Ro-Ko: BCCI

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SALAR

DIGITAL ENGLISH DAILY, BENGALURU

ساڈھ روزنامہ بنگلور

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Delhi smog clouds the sky; 228 flights cancelled, 5 diverted

NEW DELHI, 15 DEC

Dense fog and severe air pollution disrupted air traffic at Delhi airport on Monday, with more than 228 flights cancelled, five diverted and over 250 delayed due to poor visibility, officials said.

Airport operator DIAL said flight operations remained impacted as visibility was below permissible limits. “Our on-ground officials are working closely with all stakeholders to assist passengers and provide necessary support across terminals,” DIAL said.

IndiGo said low visibility across Delhi and other northern airports was “beyond our control”, adding that some flights could be delayed or proactively cancelled to prioritise safety.

The airline said it was closely monitoring the situation and issuing advisories to minimise inconvenience.

PHOTO: PTI

The disruption coincided with worsening air quality in the capital, which is also affecting animals. Veterinarians reported a spike in respiratory distress, eye infections and stomach ailments among pets and birds amid prolonged exposure to polluted air. Delhi recorded an AQI of 498 on Monday, firmly in the “severe” category, with 38 monitoring stations reporting severe air quality.

Veterinarian Sanjay Mohapatra said dogs and cats were increasingly suffering lung congestion, coughing and pneumonia, while bird specialist Rameshwar Yadav reported rising cases of eye infections and loose motion. Doctors warned that ground-level exposure makes animals especially vulnerable to PM2.5 particles.

Pet owners have been advised to limit outdoor exposure. *—PTI*

>>>More on Pages 4, 5

Class 1-5 go online in Delhi over air pollution

NEW DELHI, 15 DEC

The New Delhi government on Monday ordered schools to change class modes from hybrid to online for students up to Class 5 due to the drastic rise in air pollution levels, said sources. The circular issued by the Directorate of Education states that physical classes for students from nursery to Class 5 will be discontinued until further notice. Schools have been directed to conduct classes for these students only in online mode. However, the circular states that Classes 6 to 12 will continue to be conducted in hybrid mode. As of Monday, Delhi’s AQI is in the ‘severe’ category with a reading of 427. All schools are shut in Delhi on Tuesday. *—PTI*

Serial molester held in Bengaluru

BENGALURU, 15 DEC

A 27-year-old man, Vinod T, has been arrested for allegedly targeting and molesting women walking or riding alone during the evening. The accused, who works at a sandwich outlet, is said to have carried out such acts over the past month. Police said he would approach women, hug them tightly or touch them inappropriately, before fleeing on his two-wheeler. The case came to light when a woman lodged a complaint at Kamakshipalya police station, reporting that she was molested at Sunkadakatte on 2 December while slowing down her motorbike to avoid a pothole. *—PTI*

PHOTO: SCREENGRAB

Nitish removes hijab of woman AYUSH doctor

PATNA, 15 DEC

A video from a Bihar Government event in Patna on Monday triggered a row after Chief Minister Nitish Kumar was seen removing the hijab of a woman AYUSH doctor while handing over her appointment letter. The incident occurred at a function held at the Chief Minister’s residence, where appointment letters were being distributed to new AYUSH doctors. Nusrat Parveen, one of the appointees, stepped forward to receive her letter. After handing over the appointment letter, the chief minister asked her to remove her hijab and proceeded to take it off himself. The woman appeared upset as some people were seen laughing. *— Agencies*

Draft SIR rolls of 3 states, 2 UTs to be published today

NEW DELHI, 15 DEC

Draft electoral rolls of three states and two Union Territories will be published on Tuesday as part of the ongoing Special Intensive Revision of voters’ list. The Election Commission said draft rolls of West Bengal, Rajasthan, Goa, Puducherry and Lakshadweep will be published on Tuesday. The Chief Electoral Officers (CEOs) and District Election Officers (DEOs) will share hard copies of the draft rolls with all recognised political parties. *—PTI*

Bill to replace MGNREGA with VB-G RAM G

Amid uproar, govt tables bill; it provides 125 days of wages

NEW DELHI, 15 DEC

The Viksit Bharat Guarantee for Rozgar and Ajeevika Mission (Gramin) (VB-G RAM G) Bill, 2025 that seeks to replace the existing rural employment law MGNREGA is set to be introduced in the Lok Sabha during the ongoing Winter session of Parliament.

The Bill will provide a statutory guarantee of 125 days of wage employment every financial year to every rural household whose adult members volunteer to undertake unskilled manual work.

Within six months from the date of commencement of the VB-G RAM G Act, states will have to make a scheme consistent with the provisions of the new law.

The MGNREGS was a 100 per cent centrally sponsored scheme. However, under the VB-G RAM G Act the financial liability would be shared between the Centre and the state governments. It would be 90:10 for the Northeastern states and Himalayan states and 60:40 for all other states and Union territories with legislature. For the UTs without legislature, the whole cost would be borne by the Centre.

MGNREGS was a demand-driven scheme with the Union government bound to allocate more money if demand for work was there. But under the proposed scheme, the Centre would determine state-wise normative allocation for each financial year. Any expenditure incurred by a state in excess would be borne by the state government.

The wage rate would be specified by the Central government through a notification. The Bill says it should not be less than the prevailing wage rates under the MGNREGS.

> **Why is Mahatma Gandhi’s name being removed? Mahatma Gandhi is considered the tallest leader not just in the country but in the world... Whenever the name of a scheme is changed, there are so many changes that have to be made in offices, stationery... for which money is spent. So, what is the benefit?**
>
> —Priyanka Gandhi, Congress Leader

Rural Development Minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan, in the statement while the MGNREGA focused on the goal to “enhance the livelihood security”, the new Bill says it aims to promote “empowerment, growth, convergence and saturation for a prosperous and resilient rural Bharat”.

The Opposition created a ruckus in the Parliament and asked why Mahatma Gandhi’s name was being removed.

Congress MP Saptagiri Ulaka, who chairs the Parliamentary Standing Committee of Rural Development and Panchayati Raj, noted that “When they (BJP) came to power, PM Narendra Modi had called it a scheme for digging pits... It was always their intention to end MGNREGS.” *—PTI*

>>>>More on Page 3

A REFORM LIKE NO OTHER

The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGA) provided guaranteed wage employment to every household who wanted. The VB-G RAM G not only renames it, but modifies several provisions:

MGNREGS was 100% Centre sponsored.
- **VB-G RAM G shares the burden between states and Centre.**

MGNREGS had maximum 100-day employment.
- **VB-G RAM G extends it to 125 days.**

MGNREGS was demand driven.
- **VB-G RAM G, centre decides normative allocation.**

Rupee falls to record low of 90.78

MUMBAI, 15 DEC

The rupee on Monday crashed to its lowest-ever level of 90.80 before settling at a new all-time low of 90.78 against the US dollar, registering a loss of 29 paise over its previous close, weighed down by uncertainty over an India-US trade deal and persistent foreign fund outflows.

At the interbank foreign exchange, the rupee opened at 90.53 against the US dollar, gained slightly to 90.51 level and then lost ground to hit a record intra-day low of 90.80, registering a 31-paise decline from its previous close.

At the end of trade on Monday, the rupee was quoted at a record low of 90.78, down 29 paise over its previous close.

On Friday, the rupee had slipped 17 paise to close at an all-time low of 90.49 against the American currency.

Meanwhile, the dollar index, which gauges the greenback’s strength against a basket of six currencies, was trading 0.08 per cent lower at 98.32.

Brent crude, the global oil benchmark, was trading 0.21 per cent higher at USD 61.25 per barrel in futures trade.

On the domestic equity market front, the 30-share benchmark index, Sensex, declined 54.30 points to settle at 85,213.36, and the Nifty fell 19.65 points to 26,027.30. *—PTI*

>>>More on Page 7

NIA chargesheets six in Pahalgam terror attack

JAMMU, 15 DEC

The National Investigation Agency (NIA) on Monday submitted a detailed chargesheet against six individuals and two terrorist organisations, the Pakistan-based Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) and its shadow group, The Resistance Front (TRF), in connection with the devastating Pahalgam terror attack that resulted in the deaths of 25 tourists and a local pony operator.

The 1,597-page chargesheet was presented to a special court and outlines a significant conspiracy traced back to Pakistan. The NIA has highlighted that LeT, led by Hafeez Saeed, a recognised global terrorist, orchestrated the attack, along with TRF, headed by Habibullah Malik alias Sajid Jatt. Notable individuals include and three armed terrorists identified as Faisal Jatt alias Suleman Shah, Habeeb Tahir alias Jibran, and Hamza Afghani, all of whom were killed during an operation by the Army on 29 July. Two others were also charged for harbouring the attackers. *—PTI*

SC directs IndiGo cancellations case to Delhi HC

NEW DELHI, 15 DEC

The Supreme Court on Monday refused to entertain a public interest litigation seeking judicial intervention over the cancellation of hundreds of IndiGo flights, and directed the petitioner to approach the Delhi High Court.

A bench comprising Chief Justice Surya Kant and Justices Joymalya Bagchi and Vipul M Pamcholi noted that the high court was already seized of a similar petition. Granting liberty to the petitioner, Narendra Mishra, the bench said he could return to the apex court if his grievances were not addressed.

Senior advocate Mukul Rohatgi, appearing for IndiGo, told the court that the DGCA had constituted an expert committee on 5 December to examine flight cancellations and the problems faced by passengers. The bench permitted Mishra to seek intervention in the High Court proceedings.

Earlier, the Delhi High Court had questioned the Centre for failing to act in time. *—PTI*

MODI TAKES OFF FOR 3-NATION TOUR, LANDS IN JORDAN FOR 2 DAYS

AMMAN, 15 DEC

Prime Minister Narendra Modi arrived in Jordan on Monday on a two-day visit aimed at strengthening ties, despite the ongoing Parliament session. Jordan is the first leg of Modi’s four-day, three-nation tour, which will also take him to Ethiopia and Oman.

Modi was received by Jordan’s Prime Minister Jafar Hassan at the airport and accorded a ceremonial welcome.

Modi’s visit to Jordan is taking place after 37 years, coinciding with the 75th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between the two countries.

When Modi arrived at the hotel, he was greeted by the Indian community. Artists performed Indian dances.

India and Jordan share strong economic ties, with New Delhi being the third-largest trading partner of Amman. *— PTI*

RIJIJU SEEKS APOLOGY FROM CONG FOR ‘THREAT TO PM’S LIFE’

NEW DELHI, 15 DEC

Union Minister Kiren Rijiju sought an apology from Congress President Mallikarjun Kharge and the Leader of the Opposition in the Lok Sabha, Rahul Gandhi, for their party workers’ alleged threat to Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s life.

At a press conference here on Monday, Rijiju alleged that at Sunday’s Congress rally here, some Congress workers had threatened to dig the grave of the Prime Minister.

“Congress President Mallikarjun Kharge and Leader of the Opposition Rahul Gandhi should apologise for the Congress workers’ threat to the Prime Minister. They should apologise in both Houses of Parliament. It is most unfortunate that Congress workers openly declared to dig the grave of Prime Minister Modi,” he said. *— PTI*

India starts ‘battlefield tourism’ in Sikkim

GANGTOK, 15 DEC

India on Monday inaugurated the historic Cho La and Dok La passes in Sikkim, formally launching “battlefield tourism” along the China border under the Bharat Ranbhoomi Darshan initiative. These passes hold historical significance, with Doklam gaining attention during a 2017 border standoff and Cho La witnessing clashes in 1967.

Sikkim Chief Minister Prem Singh Tamang flagged off 25 motorbikes and vehicles to commemorate the occasion. The Bharat Ranbhoomi Darshan initiative, a collaboration between the Indian Army and the Ministry of Tourism, invites citizens to explore historic war zones, aiming to honour the sacrifices of soldiers and educate the public about India’s military history.

“This initiative seeks to open strategically significant border areas through regulated tourism while highlighting their historical and military importance,” Tamang stated. He expressed gratitude to Prime Minister Narendra Modi for his commitment to developing border villages.

Additional Chief Secretary (Tourism) CS Rao confirmed that while infrastructure development is ongoing, basic facilities are already in place to support tourists. *—Agencies*

PARTY GONE WRONG

Woman falls off balcony during police check

BENGALURU, 15 DEC

A woman was severely injured after allegedly falling from the fourth-floor balcony of a hotel in Bengaluru during a police visit, officials said on Monday.

The woman, 22, checked into the hotel with her friends the previous night to celebrate a birthday.

The group, consisting of three women and four men, had booked three rooms at the hotel in Kundalahalli.

The group was partying and consuming alcohol in one of the rooms when a noise complaint from a nearby resident prompted a visit by personnel from the HAL police station.

During the inquiry, the police recorded videos of the group and asked them to vacate the premises.

Amid the commotion, the woman, reportedly under the influence of alcohol, attempted to climb down a sewage pipeline but lost her balance and fell from the fourth-floor balcony.

She landed on the compound below, which had sharp-edged grills, sustaining severe injuries.

The woman was immediately shifted to a nearby hospital for treatment.

Based on a complaint filed by the woman’s father, a case has been registered against the hotel manage-ment for alleged security lapses.

“A thorough investigation is being conducted to ascertain the roles of the hotel owner, staff, police per-sonnel, and others involved, before taking appropriate legal action,” a senior officer said. *—PTI*

PHOTO: AI

PHOTO: FREEPIK

KIA customs seize Rs 7.71 cr ganja from 3 passengers

BENGALURU, 15 DEC

Customs officials at Kempegowda International Airport have conducted a significant operation, seizing 22.04 kg of hydroponic marijuana worth approximately Rs 7.71 crore, from three passengers arriving fromBangkok. The contraband is estimated to be valued at approximately Rs 7.71 crore, as stated on X. During routine inspections, officials discovered that the accused concealed the narcotic substance in their checked-in luggage, leading to its confiscation. All three individuals have been arrested, and a case has been filed against them under the Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances Act, 1985. Authorities have indicated that the probe is on. *—PTI*

DGP Prisons cracks down on contraband in jails

BENGALURU, 15 DEC

State DGP Prisons Alok Kumar has announced that intensive checks by jail staff across the State over the past 72 hours have resulted in the confiscation of prohibited items. "I appreciate the good work done by our team in the past 72 hours," he stated, noting the seizure of six mobile phones at Bengaluru Prison, six packets of ganja at Mysuru Prison, and seven mobile phones at Karwar Prison. Additionally, four inmates implicated in violent incidents at Karwar Jail have been transferred to other facilities to maintain discipline and security. Kumar described these initiatives as "small steps," adding that there is "a long way to go" in ensuring safety of the prisons. *—PTI*

State bags National Energy Conservation awards for 2025

BENGALURU, 15 DEC

Karnataka Renewable Energy Development Limited has clinched the National Energy Conservation Awards 2025, securing the top rank in the State Energy Efficiency Performance Award (SDA Group-1) category. "Karnataka has once again emerged as a front-runner," stated the state Energy Department, surpassing Maharashtra, which took second place. The award ceremony, held in New Delhi, was part of the National Energy Conservation Day celebrations. President Droupadi Murmu presented the award to TD Raje Gowda, MLA and Chairman of KREDL, alongside KP Rudrappaiah, its MD. Energy Minister KJ George noted, "Karnataka has consistently ranked among the top-performing states in energy efficiency," securing the 'Front Runner' title for four consecutive years, with the exception of a 2nd-rank in 2024. *—PTI*

Accident-free KSRTC drivers get more perks

BENGALURU, 15 DEC

The Karnataka State Road Transport Corporation (KSRTC) has increased incentives for drivers who maintain an accident-free record. KSRTC MD Akram Pasha issued the order, revising both cash awards and monthly allowances. Drivers receiving the Chief Minister's Gold Medal will now be awarded Rs 10,000, up from Rs 5,000, with a monthly allowance of Rs 1,000 instead of Rs 500. Those awarded the Silver Medal will receive Rs 5,000, doubled from Rs 2,500, and their monthly allowance will rise from Rs 250 to Rs 500. These revised incentives are set to take effect from 1 January, 2026. *—Agencies*

Worms found in Koppal school's midday meals

Headmaster gets notice as kids may have eaten worms

KOPPAL, 15 DEC

A viral video showing worms in children's lunch at a government school in Koppal Taluk has prompted concern of the hygiene of midday meals. School authorities state that rice is distributed by Akshara Dasoha and most likely stored for a long time. Authorities on Monday said a show-cause notice had been issued to the headmaster.

After children on 9 December at Old Ningapura Government School found cooked worms in the hot lunch, they reported the incident to staff and parents.

No major illness was reported, authorities said.

Complaints and allegations from the parents soon followed. They said that the staff responsible for checking rice quality were not performing their duties.

Authorities have assured that the issue will be investigated PHOTO: X

"I have called the cooks and advised them that the rice or crop should be washed and cooked well. If there are worms, it should be informed and replaced," said chairman of the school development committee, Hanumanthappa Hatti on Monday. "However, since the Akshara Dasoha officials distribute the rice crop that has been stored in stock, the children have to eat such cooked meals."

The rice may have been stored in a corner for an extended period before being selected for cooking. Due to the same rice being cooked without proper separation of worms, the children might have ingested the worms along with their meals, he added.

Officials said that they have directed a food health officer to collect samples and file a report.

"We are also conducting meetings with headmasters of various schools, instructing them to carry out regular inspections of food grains," the official added. *—Agencies*

Samples collected from Eggo: DGR

BENGALURU, 15 DEC

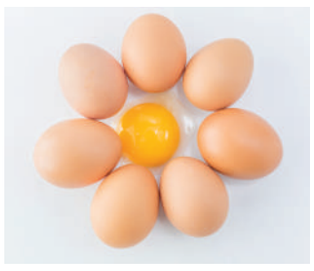
Health Minister Dinesh Gundu Rao said that samples from various brands, including the brand Eggos, have been sent for analysis as he sought to allay fears that egg brands were using a 'genotoxic substances' that may cause cancer.

The State government has already collected samples for testing, Rao said on Monday, assuring the public that all concerns would be scientifically verified.

"I have instructed my officers to obtain clear information about the content of the eggs," Rao said.

Rao emphasised that eggs are generally good for health and urged citizens not to panic. "Last year, 125 egg samples were tested across the state; 124 were found safe, and only one had an issue".

He also said officials are monitoring the supply chain closely to ensure no compromised eggs reach consumers. The government will wait for laboratory results and share the findings once available. *—PTI*



- Health Minister Dinesh Gundu Rao said officers were collecting egg samples, including from Eggos amid claims that harmful antibiotics were being used in the eggs

INFLATION HITS VEGGIES

Bengaluru residents brave rising prices to purchase fresh vegetables near Lalbagh, Bengaluru, on Monday. Consumer inflation reached 0.71 per in November PHOTO: MOHAMMED ASAD

Assembly adjourned to mourn Shamanur Shivashankarappa

BELAGAVI, 15 DEC

The Karnataka Legislative Assembly on Monday mourned the demise of 94-year-old veteran member of the House, Shamanur Shivashankarappa. The session was adjourned for Tuesday after paying condolences to the Davangere South MLA.

Shankarappa, a former Minister, had passed away in a private hospital in Bengaluru on Sunday.

Speaker UT Khader remembered Shivashankarappa as an entrepreneur who entered public life in 1969 as a member of the Davanagere City Municipal Council.

He was first elected from the Davanagere Assembly constituency in 1994 and entered the 10th Legislative Assembly, Khader said.

"Through the establishment of several educational institutions, including engineering and medical colleges, he made an outstanding contribution to the field of education. He left his distinctive mark across all spheres of social life," Khader said.

Council members pay condolence to late MLA Shamanur

- Speaker UT Khader remembered Shivashankarappa as an entrepreneur who entered public life in 1969 as a member of the Davanagere City Municipal Council

Chief Minister Siddaramaiah termed Shivashankarappa as 'Ajatashatru' (a person who has no enemies) as he was loved by all.

He also recalled that during Covid-19 pandemic, Shivashankarappa provided Rs 6 crore worth of oxygen at free of cost.

Leader of Opposition R Ashoka remembered the senior-most member of the House as "full of life".

The government also ordered that his last rites be performed with full state honours. *—PTI*

Ashoka seeks to extend Winter Session by 1 week

BELAGAVI, 15 DEC

Leader of Opposition in the State Assembly R Ashoka requested Speaker UT Khader to extend the ongoing Winter Session of the for one more week.

In a letter to the Speaker, he said there is a need to discuss several issues.

"It was decided to hold the winter session in Belagavi from 8 to 19 December but due to some reasons, the session has been shortened by 2 days," Ashoka said, likely pointing at House being adjourned on 8 and 15December, after condoling the death of sitting MLAs HY Meti and Samanuru Shivashankarappa, respectively.

"There are many burning issues concerning the State, pending discussion in the session," he added.

Along with regular question and answer sessions, the House has been discussing issues concerning North Karnataka and its development for the last week.

Man held over offensive post on Hindus

MANGALURU, 15 DEC

A man was arrested on arrival in Mangaluru for allegedly posting derogatory and provocative content about the Hindu religion while staying abroad, police said on Monday.

The accused Abdul Khader Nehad, 27, a resident of Ulaibettu in Mangaluru, was working in Saudi Arabia, they said.

Police said a suo motu case was registered at the Bajpe police station on 11 October after an allegedly derogatory and provocative post about the Hindu religion was uploaded on the Instagram account 'team_sdpi_2025'.

During the investigation, technical analysis revealed that the post was uploaded by Nehad, who was staying in Saudi Arabia at the time, a senior police officer said.

Based on this, a Look Out Circular (LOC) was issued against him, he said.

On 14 December, Nehad arrived at the Calicut International Airport in Kerala, where he was taken into custody by the police. Further investigation is going on, according to the police. *— PTI*

GBA opens applications for elections

BENGALURU/ NEW DELHI, 15 DEC

The government began accepting applications for the Greater Bengaluru Authority (GBA) elections on Monday.

"An application fee of Rs 50,000 will be taken from the general category, and Rs 25,000 from women and Dalits," Deputy Chief Minister DK Shivakumar said in New Delhi.

He said that the government was collecting a building fund.

"Funds are required to construct the party building, and hence this amount will be collected," he said

"Although reservation has not yet been finalised, applications are being invited to understand who is interested in contesting from the 369 wards," Shivakumar had earlier said. The polls are likely to take place next year, although the official dates are yet to be announced. Bengaluru has not had local polls since 2020. *—Agencies*

Alleging vote chori won't help you win: Deve gowda

NEW DELHI, 15 DEC

Former PM HD Deve Gowda on Monday said the Opposition Congress in the Centre wouldn't win if they continue to raise allegations of "vote chori" and create suspicion in the minds of voters by blaming the Prime Minister Modi-led government.

Participating in a discussion on election reforms in the Rajya Sabha, he criticised the Opposition for making a mockery about the Prime Minister "on streets and on public platforms."

"Please remember my friends, by using the words 'vote chori' you are going to suffer. You are not going to win the battle," Deve Gowda said. He said that during his over seven decades of public life, he has never complained about vote theft despite facing defeat. He also cited a letter written by former PM Jawaharlal Nehru regarding the inclusion of 18,000 voters in Kerala. "I am saying this because during Nehru period also, there were lapses in the electoral part," said Deve Gowda. *— PTI*

National Herald case: DKS to seek 1 week to appear before Delhi cops

NEW DELHI/BENGALURU, 15 DEC

Deputy Chief Minister DK Shivakumar said on Monday that he will request more time from the Delhi police to appear before them next week, to provide information in connection with the National Herald case.

He said he will seek a slot after the winter session of the Karnataka legislature, which ends on 19 December. "I will also ask the Delhi police to provide me a copy of the FIR," he added.

Shivakumar, who is in New Delhi, had earlier said that he would appear before the Delhi police on Monday. But he postponed the plan to rush back to Karnataka to attend the last rites of veteran Congress leader Shamanuru Shivashankarappa, scheduled later in the day at Davangere.

The Delhi Police had issued a notice to Shivakumar seeking transaction details in connection with the National Herald case.

In the notice dated 29 November, the EOW had asked Shivakumar to appear before it or provide the requested information by 19 December.

Investigators have sought details of the funds allegedly transferred by him or associated entities to 'Young Indian.' *— PTI*

Ilaiyaraaja to perform special concert in City

BENGALURU, 15 DEC

Maestro Ilaiyaraaja will hold a special concert here in the City month to mark 50 years of his musical journey, coinciding with the silver jubilee celebrations of the Akshaya Patra Foundation. The event, titled 'Ilaiyaraaja 50: A Legendary Musical Journey', will be held on 10 January, 2026, at the NICE Grounds in Madavara.

The concert will support 'Music for Meals', an initiative of the Akshaya Patra Foundation that leverages music-led programmes to raise awareness and mobilise support for providing mid-day meals to schoolchildren.

The Foundation said it currently serves nutritious mid-day meals to about 2.33 million children every school day across 23,978 government and government-aided schools. The foundation is a key implementing partner of the Centre's PM POSHAN programme.

Addressing a press conference in the City on Monday, Ilaiyaraaja said he agreed to perform as soon as the foundation approached him.

Ilaiyaraaja PHOTO: MOHAMMED ASAD

"When it is for a good cause, I have to do it," he said.

"If a concert can help fill an empty stomach and keep a child in school, then every raga and every rhythm gains deeper meaning," he added. "I began working under noted composer GK Venkatesh and was involved in nearly 250 Kannada films before becoming a music director," he added. *—PTI*

IMPORTED FROM SOUTH AFRICA

BBP gets 8 black-capped capuchin apes

BENGALURU, 15 DEC

Bannerghatta Biological Park (BBP) on Monday announced the successful import of eight black-capped capuchin monkeys from a wildlife facility in South Africa under an animal exchange programme.

The four male and four female monkeys (Sapajus apella) were imported from the Induna Primate and Parrot Park in South Africa and arrived at the Kempegowda International Airport at around 9pm on 14 December, BBP said in a statement.

The exchange, carried out under a duly approved animal exchange programme, aims to strengthen conservation initiatives, enhance genetic diversity of the captive population, promote visitor awareness, and support scientific research, the statement said.

PHOTOS: WIKIPEDIA

"All animals were inspected and quarantined in South Africa as per the prescribed guidelines. In addition, advance no-objection certificates were obtained from the Animal Quarantine Services before importation," the statement said.

Upon arrival, the capuchins were placed in a designated quarantine facility and will undergo post-import health checks before being moved to the zoo premises for public display, officials said.

The import was conducted in strict compliance with all statutory and regulatory requirements, officials said.

"This initiative underscores Bannerghatta Biological Park's continued commitment to global conservation collaboration, scientific animal management, and compliance with national and international wildlife regulations," the statement added. *—PTI*

PHOTO: PTI

Over 25L voters untraced during SIR in Kerala

T'PURAM, 15 DEC

Over 25 lakh untraced voters have been found by BLOs during the Special Intensive Revision (SIR) of electoral rolls in Kerala. Chief Election Officer Rathan U Kelkar, BLOs identified 6.44 lakh deceased voters during verification. Another 8.19 lakh were found to have permanently moved, 1.31 lakh had multiple entries, and details were unavailable for about 7.12 lakh voters. Voters whom Booth Level Officers (BLOs) could not reach to deliver enumeration forms have been added to the untraced category. However, representatives of various political parties raised concerns over alleged discrepancies in the Election Commission's figures on untraced voters. The SIR process had been completed in Kasaragod, Kollam, and Wayanad districts and would be completed in the remaining districts soon. *—PTI*

Activists held for attacking Muslim League workers

KANNUR, 15 DEC

CPI(M) activists were arrested for allegedly attacking the homes of Muslim League members wielding weapons after the local body election results in the district, according to police reports on Monday. Officers from Kulavallur police station registered multiple cases related to the incidents of violence which occurred in Panoor on Saturday, leading to the arrest of Amal, Sreeju, Jeevan, Sachin, and Renish. A police official confirmed that a total of five cases have been filed, implicating members from both the Left Democratic Front (LDF) and the United Democratic Front (UDF). The suspects were identified through CCTV footage, with additional suspects still at large. The arrested individuals were presented before a magistrate and remanded to judicial custody on Sunday. *—PTI*

PHOTO: PTI

Kerala HC extends protection for rape accused MLA Rahul

KOCHI, 15 DEC

Kerala High Court on Monday extended interim protection from arrest for expelled Congress MLA Rahul Mamkootathil in a case alleging rape and forcing a woman to abort her pregnancy. A bench led by Justice K Babu, hearing Mamkootathil's petition challenging the Thiruvananthapuram Principal District and Sessions Court's denial of anticipatory bail, has scheduled the next hearing for 18 December. The court extended its earlier direction restraining the police from arresting Mamkootathil until the petition is considered. Meanwhile, a separate petition was filed by the state government challenging court's order granting pre-arrest bail to him. *—PTI*

Bill to repeal 71 laws introduced in LS

The Bill is not aimed at striking off colonial laws but to remove Acts which outlived their utility

NEW DELHI, 15 DEC

A bill to repeal 71 laws which have outlived their utility in the statute books was introduced in the Lok Sabha on Monday.

While 65 of the bills are amendment Acts, which were brought to tweak existing laws, six are principal laws that have become outdated.

At least one law, proposed to be repealed, is of the British era -- The Indian Tramways Act of 1886.

The law was brought to facilitate the construction and to regulate the working of tramways in British India.

The proposed repeal and amendment Bill is not aimed at striking off colonial laws but to remove Acts which have outlived their utility.

"Once an amendment is passed by Parliament, it gets subsumed in the principal law. It then only clutters the statute books. Its use has ended, but it still exists, creating confusion," an official explained.

So far, 1,562 old archaic laws have been repealed. Once the proposed Bill gets Parliament's nod, the total number of laws to be repealed will stand at 1,633.

BJP MP Dilip Saikia presides over the Lok Sabha during the Winter session of Parliament, in New Delhi *PHOTO: PTI*

Bill to open nuclear sector to pvt firms

A new bill aims to transform India's civil nuclear sector by allowing private participation and establishing a new liability regime, addressing concerns from industry partners. The Sustainable Harnessing and Advancement of Nuclear Energy for Transforming India Bill, 2025, proposes repealing the Atomic Energy Act, 1962, and the Civil Liability for Nuclear Damage Act, 2010. Minister of State in PMO, Jitendra Singh, stated, "The Bill seeks to provide for a pragmatic civil liability regime for nuclear damage." *—PTI*

Since May 2014, the Modi government has been consistently repealing colonial era, archaic and obsolete laws to declutter statute books.

Successive Union law ministers have maintained that obsolete laws are impediments in the normal life of common people and do not have relevance in the present time, nor deserve to remain in the statute books.

Clause 4 of the Bill contains a precautionary provision which it is usual to include in the Bill of this kind.

It states that the repeal by the proposed Act of any enactment will not affect any other enactment in which the repealed enactment has been applied, incorporated or referred to. *—PTI*

BILL TO SET UP HIGHER EDUCATION COMMISSION TABLED IN LOK SABHA

NEW DELHI, 15 DEC

The Viksit Bharat Shiksha Adhishthan Bill that seeks to set up an overarching higher education commission along with three councils was introduced in the Lok Sabha on Monday with the government expressing willingness to refer it to a joint committee.

Union Education Minister **Dharmendra Pradhan** introduced the Bill amid din over the issue of alleged threatening slogans raised at a Congress rally on Sunday against Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

The higher education commission, which will be headed by a chairperson appointed by the President of India, will cover all central universities and colleges under it, institutes of national importance functioning under the administrative purview of the Ministry of Education including IITs, NITs, IISc, IISERs, IIMs, and IIITs."The Viksit Bharat Shiksha Adhishthan will be an apex umbrella body to provide direction for comprehensive and holistic growth of higher education and ensure co-ordination between the Councils," the Bill said.

"The Standards Council shall ensure synchronisation and determination of academic standards in higher educational institutions, the Regulatory Council shall ensure co-ordination and maintenance of standards in higher educational institutions, while the Accreditation Council shall be an accrediting body to supervise and oversee an independent ecosystem of accreditation," it added. *—PTI*

Jammu and Kashmir CM Omar Abdullah with state Deputy CM Surinder Choudhary during a review meeeting to assess development works in Srinagar district *PHOTO: PTI*

Omar keeps distance from 'vote theft'; Tharoor flays RaGa

SRINAGAR/NEW DELHI, 15 DEC

Jammu and Kashmir Chief Minister Omar Abdullah on Monday distanced himself from the "vote theft" issue raised by the Congress and said the INDIA bloc has nothing to do with it.

Meanwhile, Congress MP Shashi Tharoor on Monday termed "thoughtful" an analysis by an X user who posted a long thread about the contrast between Tharoor and Rahul Gandhi.

The X user said the contrast between Tharoor and Rahul Gandhi reflects two ideological tendencies that have existed in the Congress.

"The problem is not their coexistence. The problem is Congress's inability to choose or execute either coherently," the X user who commented on Tharoor and Rahul Gandhi said.

The X user said in his post that Tharoor broadly aligns with a 1990s-era Congress tendency that is urban-facing, institutionally-oriented and reform-compatible.

Tharoor has not engaged in a "rightward shift" as many in the Congress think, the X user said.

"He was always a proud Hindu, and has even wrote a book about it titled 'Why I am a Hindu'," the post read. "Many on the Right are noticing it only now," it added.

The Congress today is neither a credible urban reformist party nor a serious rural mass party, the post said.

Responding to the 'vote chori' campaign, NCP-SP Lok Sabha MP Supriya Sule said she will not blame electronic voting machines (EVMs) as she was elected four times through EVMs. Sule's NCP-SP is part of the Maharashtra Vikas Aghadi coalition comprising the Congress and Shiv Sena (UBT). *—PTI*

BJP Nat'l Working Prez takes charge

NEW DELHI, 15 DEC

Nitin Nabin assumed his responsibilities as the National Working President of the BJP on Monday at the party headquarters in New Delhi. His appointment marks a generational shift within the ruling party, with expectations that he may eventually succeed current president JP Nadda.

Nabin, 45, arrived from Patna where he had been serving as the Public Works Department minister in the Nitish Kumar-led NDA government. He was welcomed at the Indira Gandhi International Airport by Delhi Chief Minister Rekha Gupta and other BJP leaders. Prominent figures such as Home Minister Amit Shah and Education Minister Dharmendra Pradhan were present during the ceremony at the headquarters.

Expressing gratitude for his appointment, Nabin described it as a "blessing" from the party and reaffirmed its commitment to empowering grassroots workers. He highlighted the BJP's unique ability to nurture talent, ensuring that no group in India is untouched by the government's development initiatives. Before leaving for Delhi, Nabin paid floral tributes to a statue of his late father, Nabin Kishor Prasad Sinha, a former BJP MLA, stating that he would continue his father's legacy of prioritising the nation and the party. He credited Prime Minister Narendra Modi for the extensive reach of development initiatives and asserted that BJP workers are always prepared for electoral challenges across states like West Bengal and Assam.

Nabin, a five-time MLA representing the Bankipur constituency, comes with a background in the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and is known for his effective organisational leadership within the party. *—PTI*

Union Home Minister Amit Shah congratulates newly appointed BJP National Working President Nitin Nabin during a ceremony, in New Delhi, on Monday *PHOTO: PTI*

TN WON'T BOW BEFORE ARROGANCE: STALIN TO SHAH, RSS

TIRUVANNAMALAI, 15 DEC

Lashing out at the BJP, Chief Minister MK Stalin said not only Union Minister Amit Shah, but even an entire battalion of RSS cadres will not be able to electorally influence Tamil Nadu, and that the DMK would emerge victorious in elections.

Addressing a meeting of DMK's youth wing (north zone) functionaries here, Stalin recalled the hard work behind the growth and development of the party's youth wing over the decades and the work of its leaders, including him.

"The duty is not just to safeguard Tamil Nadu and the Tamil language; we have to protect the whole of India and its pluralism. The DMK is the only regional party that is ideologically fighting the BJP in entire India. They (BJP) could not succeed in Tamil Nadu," the CM said. Recently, the CM said, that Amit Shah had asserted that Tamil Nadu is the BJP's next target following its victory in Bihar. *—PTI*

Cong expels Odisha ex-MLA after letter to Sonia

BHUBANESWAR, 15 DEC

Senior Congress leader and former MLA Mohammed Moquim has been expelled from the party after he wrote a letter to Congress leader Sonia Gandhi following his recent challenges to the state leadership, according to an Odisha Pradesh Congress Committee (OPCC) official.

OPCC President Bhakta Charan Das confirmed that Moquim's expulsion was approved by the AICC due to "anti-party activities." Das stated, "This is for the information of all concerned that AICC has approved the proposal for the expulsion of Sri Md. Moquim from the primary membership of the party, due to anti-party activities."

Moquim, who previously served as the MLA for the Barabati-Cuttack assembly segment, publicly questioned the OPCC leadership and wrote a five-page letter to Gandhi, which he subsequently shared with the media. Congress sources noted that discussing internal matters publicly is inappropriate.

In response to his expulsion, Moquim asserted, "I have no regret about writing a letter to Sonia Gandhi and raising pertinent issues. They have expelled me from the party, but cannot distance me from the Congress ideology which I follow in letter and spirit." *—PTI*

M'rashtra to hold civic polls on 15 Jan

MUMBAI, 15 DEC

The long-awaited polls to 29 municipal corporations in Maharashtra, including cash-rich Mumbai, where elections are due since early 2022, will be held on 15 January and votes will be counted on 16 January, the State Election Commission (SEC) said on Monday.

As many as 2,869 seats in these municipal corporations, including 227 in the Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC) -- Asia's largest civic body with more than Rs 74,000 crore budget in 2025-26 -- will be up for grabs, said the SEC.

Announcing the schedule for municipal corporation polls at a press conference here, State Election Commissioner Dinesh Waghmare said more than 3.48 crore voters are eligible to vote.

With the announcement of the schedule, the model code of conduct has come into force in these municipal corporations.

Filing of nomination papers will begin on 23 December and the process will go on till 30 December.

Symbol allocation and final list of candidates will be published on 3 January.

Former Shiv Sena (UBT) corporator Tejasvee Ghosalkar joined the BJP on Monday, ahead of the Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC) polls. *—PTI*

Ram Janmabhoomi movement leader dies at 67

REWA, 15 DEC

Ram Vilas Vedanti, a prominent leader of the Ram Janmabhoomi movement and former Bharatiya Janata Party MP, has died at the age of 67 after suffering a heart attack in Rewa, Madhya Pradesh. An official confirmed his passing occurred on Monday morning after he was admitted to Superspecialty Hospital affiliated with Shyam Shah Medical College the previous day.

"Vedanti was battling a severe blood poisoning (septicemia) infection which had progressed significantly, leading to a notable drop in his blood pressure and kidney failure," stated Dr Akshay Srivastava, superintendent of the hospital. "He suffered a heart attack on Sunday night and was placed on ventilator support, but he passed away this morning."

Ram Vilas Vedanti *PHOTO: ANI*

Attempts to airlift him to the All India Institute of Medical Sciences in Bhopal were thwarted by poor visibility, Dr Srivastava added. Vedanti served as executive president of the Shri Ram Janmabhoomi Trust and had previously represented Pratapgarh and Machhali Shahar in the Lok Sabha. The last rites would be performed in Ayodhya. *—PTI*

POST MUNICIPAL POLL WIN

Marry women for sex, kids: Kerala CPM leader

MALAPPURAM, 15 DEC

In a shocking display of misogyny, **Sayed Ali Majeed**, a member of Kerala's ruling Communist Party of India (Marxist) [CPM], provoked outrage with his remarks following a narrow victory in municipal elections.

Celebrating his 47-vote win in Malappuram, Majeed accused rival Indian Union Muslim League (IUML) of "using women for votes", stating, "They displayed women to win votes..." before a cheering crowd.

Not stopping there, Majeed shamed women candidates from his own party, declaring, "...we also have married women at home... but not to show them off to win votes. Let them sit at home... marry women to sleep with and make kids." His comments sparked widespread condemnation on social media.

The election results were a setback for the CPM-led Left Democratic Front (LDF), with the Congress-led United Democratic Front (UDF) winning four out of six municipal corporations, retaining control in Kannur and flipping Kochi and Kollam.

In a notable shift, the Bharatiya Janata Party-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) gained control of Thiruvananthapuram, a former Left bastion.

In a separate controversy, IUML leader Shihabuddeen threatened political opponents, stating they would face severe repercussions if they touched party workers.

Both incidents highlight growing tensions in Kerala's political landscape ahead of the 2026 Assembly elections. *—Agencies*

Haryana govt removes DGP Shatrujeet accused in IPS officer's suicide case

CHANDIGARH, 15 DEC

Two months after being sent on leave amid a controversy over IPS officer Y Puran Kumar's alleged suicide, the Haryana government has removed IPS officer Shatrujeet Kapur from the post of Director General of Police.

OP Singh, who was given charge as police chief during Kapur's absence, has been appointed as officiating DGP.

Haryana is likely to send a panel of IPS officers' names to the Union Public Service Commission to appoint a new police chief, as Singh, is retiring on 31 December.

Shatrujeet Kapur *PHOTO: WIKIPEDIA*

Kapur, a 1990-batch IPS officer, will continue to head the Haryana Police Housing Corporation.

On 14 October, Kapur went on leave amid mounting criticism over IPS officer Y. Puran Kumar's alleged suicide.

Kumar, 52, a 2001-batch IPS officer, allegedly shot himself dead on 7 October.

In an eight-page 'final note' left behind, Kumar accused senior officers, including Shatrujeet Kapur, of "caste discrimination, and public humiliation."

Kumar's wife, IAS officer Amneet P Kumar, allowed post-mortem a week after the suicide after assurance from Chandigarh Police that a fair probe would be held. *—PTI*

Anjaw truck crash: Search concludes, 20 bodies recovered

ITANAGAR, 15 DEC

The Anjaw district administration in Arunachal Pradesh on Monday officially called off the search and rescue operation after a mini-truck carrying labourers from Assam plunged into a deep gorge. Twenty bodies were recovered and one person was rescued alive following four days of intensive efforts, Deputy Commissioner Millo Kojin said. The accident occurred on the night of 8 December on the Hayuliang–Chaglagam road but came to light two days later when the injured survivor reached a nearby Border Roads Task Force camp. Authorities later confirmed that 21 people, including the driver, were on board. The operation involved the NDRF, Army, BRTF, police and district officials, who worked in difficult terrain and weather conditions. *—PTI*

PHOTO: PTI

Sabarimala pilgrim turnout exceeds 25L this season

PATHANAMTHITTA, 15 DEC

Pilgrim turnout at Sabarimala's Lord Ayyappa Temple has surpassed 25 lakh during the on-going Mandalam pilgrimage season, a senior official said on Monday. ADGP S Sreejith, Chief Police Coordinator for Sabarimala, noted that darshan is going smoothly despite the surge from last year's 21 lakh visitors. Initial crowding was managed effectively through timely interventions, with congestion largely attributed to devotees not attending on their allocated virtual queue dates. Sreejith urged pilgrims to adhere to their scheduled slots to ensure sufficient darshan time. He added that weekends see lower footfall. The rush is expected to intensify towards late December. The Mandala pooja, marking the 1st phase of the pilgrimage, is on 27 December.*—PTI*

Court acquits two men in 2020 Delhi riots case

NEW DELHI, 15 DEC

A Delhi court has acquitted two men, who were accused of arson, theft, and vandalism in Delhi's Chang Bangh on 25 February, 2020. Additional Sessions Judge Parveen Singh ruled in favour of Mohammed Farooq and Mohammed Shadab, acquitting them of Delhi 2020 riots. The court noted "serious doubts" over the credibility of prosecution witness ASI Sunil and said it was imprudent to rely solely on his testimony. Video evidence cited by police showed the accused in a mob on 24 February, not 25 February, while the FIR was filed on 1 March, 2020. Judge Singh concluded that both accused "are given the benefit of doubt and are acquitted of all offences." *—PTI*

Women patrol in HP's Bilaspur to fight heroin menace

BILASPUR, 15 DEC

In Bilaspur's Leghat village, women brave winter nights, patrolling streets with torches and sticks to combat adulterated heroin, locally called chitta. Members of Laghat Mahila Mandal monitor suspicious activity, question passersby, and report offenders. "Our aim is to apprehend drug traffickers and ensure the village remains safe. Community participation with police is essential," said Mandal head Pinky Sharma. A new link road has increased outsider movement at night, exploited by traffickers to lure youth. The initiative has villagers' support. Bilaspur SP Sandeep Dhawal praised their efforts, promising full police support. Chitta, a highly addictive opioid, is spreading to rural areas, drawing students into the network. Officials warn inaction could deepen the menace. *—PTI*

'Deepathoon' not Hindu pillar, Jains used it: TN

Madras HC pillar ruling triggers backlash, impeachment call

MADURAI, 15 DEC

The stone pillar referred to as 'Deepathoon' atop Thirupparankundran hill near a Dargah may not be a temple lamp, but a Jain structure, the Tamil Nadu HR & CE department submitted before the Madras High Court on Monday.

Historical and archaeological evidence, including a 1920 book by scholar Bose and a 1981 TN Archaeology Department publication, indicate the Karthigai Deepam was traditionally lit at the Uchchipillaiyar Temple, the department said.

Senior counsel N Jyothi stressed HR & CE procedures govern temple rituals, while S Sridhar argued the century-old practice cannot be altered by individual preference. Dargah counsel T Mohan added that personal opinions cannot override tradition.

Historical and archaeological evidence indicate that the Karthigai Deepam was traditionally lit at Uchchipillaiyar Temple *PHOTO: SCREENGRAB*

The submission came as the division bench of Justices G Jayachandran and KK Ramakrishnan heard appeals challenging Justice GR Swaminathan's 1 December order directing temple authorities to light the lamp at the Deepathoon, in addition to the customary lighting near the Uchi Pillaiyar Mandapam. The order sparked a political storm, with several Opposition MPs, led by the DMK, submitting a notice to Lok Sabha Speaker Om Birla seeking the judge's impeachment. Former Madhya Pradesh HC judge KK Trivedi condemned the move as politically motivated or an attempt to pressure the judge. "This undermines public confidence in the judiciary," he said, adding that impeachment motions must be based on proven misconduct or incapacity. Fifty-six former SC and HC judges denounced the attempt as a "brazen effort to browbeat judges."

The TN government has approached the Supreme Court. BJP leaders claimed the Opposition's stance represents a "structural nefarious attack" on India's "basic identity." The controversy highlights the tension between judicial authority, temple tradition, historical interpretation, and political interests. *—PTI*

PROBE ESCALATES

KOLKATA, 15 DEC

The West Bengal Police on Monday issued summons to officials of six organisations involved in managing Lionel Messi's appearance at Salt Lake Stadium, citing "gross mismanagement" that triggered chaos and vandalism. Acting on an FIR, police have arrested six people so far, including prime organiser Satadru Datta, with estimated damage exceeding Rs 2 crore.

Summons were served on Laltu Das, manager of Datta; event manager Manali Bhattacharya; Supriya Dasgupta; Sambaran Karmakar; Aditya Das; and Amit Kumar, a senior official of a food delivery aggregator.

All have been asked to appear before the Bidhannagar Police Commissionerate on Tuesday. Investigators are probing alleged violations of SOPs, including unauthorised food and beverage sales inside the stadium, containers of which were later used as missiles during the rampage. Five spectators have been arrested on charges of vandalism, assault on police personnel and destruction of public property, based on video evidence, police said.

The fallout reached the Calcutta High Court on Monday, where Acting Chief Justice Sujoy Pal allowed three public interest litigations seeking transfer of the probe to central agencies such as the CBI, ED and SFIO. The petitions also challenge the state-appointed inquiry committee headed by retired justice Ashim Kumar Ray, alleging hasty constitution and possible financial irregularities in ticket sales.

Police have frozen bank accounts linked to ticket distribution and halted transactions with Datta.

Separately, filmmaker and TMC MLA Raj Chakraborty filed a police complaint over alleged abusive online trolling of actor Subhashree Ganguly for posting photographs with Messi. He condemned the targeting as hurtful and stressed her right to attend the event as a football fan. *—PTI*

> **It compelled me to pause and reflect on what we were really trying to achieve**
>
> -Abhinav Bindra, Olympic gold-winning former Indian shooter

SC shields actors Talpade, Alok Nath from arrest in scam case

NEW DELHI, 15 DEC

The Supreme Court on Monday protected actors Shreyas Talpade and Alok Nath from arrest until the conclusion of investigation in a case alleging cheating and criminal breach of trust by a cooperative society.

A bench of Justices B V Nagarathna and R Mahadevan continued the interim protection while disposing of Talpade's petition. "We dispose of this writ petition by continuing the interim order of protection from arrest granted by us until the investigation into the offences against the petitioner is complete," the bench said.

Appearing for Talpade, counsel told the court the actor had attended the society's annual event merely as a guest celebrity and had not earned any money. "I am not supposed to know," the lawyer submitted.

Shreyas Talpade, Alok nath

PHOTO: PTI

Counsel for Nath said the veteran actor had not attended any function and that his photograph had allegedly been used for the past 10 years without his involvement.

The bench questioned criminal liability for celebrity endorsements.

The court was hearing pleas by Talpade and Nath seeking clubbing of FIRs registered across several states in connection with the case.

Thirteen persons, including the two actors, were booked on a complaint by Sonipat resident Vipul Antil, who alleged they promoted Human Welfare Credit Cooperative Society Ltd as brand ambassadors.

Police said an FIR was registered on January 22 under Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita provisions. *—PTI*

Journo gets bail in fraud case

The Supreme Court has granted interim bail to journalist Mahesh Langa in an alleged money laundering and fraud case filed by the Enforcement Directorate (ED). The case against Langa stems from two Ahmedabad police FIRs for fraud, misappropriation, breach of trust, cheating, and causing wrongful loss worth lakhs of rupees. The SC has scheduled the next hearing for 6 January, 2026, when the ED must file a status report on Langa's compliance. The charges are yet to be framed. *—PTI*

SC steps in for PwDs

The SC has asked the Centre's Department of Empowerment of PwDs to frame care guidelines for people with autism and intellectual disabilities, following a plea by NGO Hrdya Saras Foundation and others seeking audits, and accountability to prevent abuse or neglect in such facilities. The petition seeks residential facilities in every district. It also seeks mandatory standards, including proper nutrition, safe living conditions, medical care, and transparent finances to prevent exploitative fees. *—PTI*

Man kills stranger to fake own death for insurance in Latur

LATUR, 15 DEC

A Latur resident was arrested for allegedly murdering a man and burning his body inside a car to fake his own death and claim a Rs 1 crore insurance payout, police said on Monday.

Superintendent of Police Amol Tambe said the accused, Ganesh Gopinath Chavan, was under severe financial stress, with debts of around Rs 57 lakh. He had taken a Rs 1 crore term insurance policy three years ago and planned the crime to secure the payout for his family.

Police were alerted on Saturday after a car was found burning on the Vanavada Pati–Vanavada road in Ausa tehsil, with a charred body inside. Initially registered as an accidental death, the probe found the vehicle belonged to Baliram Gangadhar Rathod but was being used by Chavan. His wife told police he had left home on December 13 to deliver a laptop and did not return.

Though the body was first identified as Chavan's, suspicion led Crime Branch teams to discover he was alive and hiding in Sindhudurg district. Investigators said Chavan picked up Govind Kishan Yadav (50), who was drunk, offered him food, and set the car on fire after he fell asleep.

Chavan was arrested within 24 hours and booked for murder and destruction of evidence. *—PTI*

Delhi pollution forces courts to go hybrid

NEW DELHI, 15 DEC

Amid severe pollution, the Delhi High Court on Monday advised lawyers and parties-in-person to use its hybrid hearing facility, urging video conferencing where convenient.

Delhi remained under dense smog, with the AQI touching 498 in the 'severe' category. A circular from the registrar general said members of the Bar and litigants may opt for virtual appearances citing weather conditions, noting the court already functions in hybrid mode.

On Sunday, CJI Surya Kant issued a similar advisory for Supreme Court matters. Data showed air quality was 'severe' at 38 stations and 'very poor' at two, with

Jahangirpuri recording the worst AQI at 498. Delhi Traffic Police rolled out a winter safety plan for over 6,000 personnel, including air-filter masks and health check-ups. A senior officer said prolonged road duty increases health risks.

SC to hear NCR pollution plea on 17 Dec

The Supreme Court will hear a Delhi-NCR pollution plea on 17 December. *—PTI*

Goa fire: Luthra brothers likely to be deported from Thailand today

NEW DELHI, 15 DEC

Goa nightclub co-owners Gaurav and Saurabh Luthra may be deported to India as early as Tuesday, with central agencies coordinating their transfer from Thailand to Delhi, officials said.

A team has reached the location where Thai authorities detained the brothers last week, and legal formalities are being completed ahead of their expected arrival.

Once in Delhi, the Goa Police are set to arrest the duo and take them to Goa for further investigation, sources said.

Lookout circulars were issued at the request of the Goa Police, followed by an Interpol Blue Corner Notice, while the Ministry of External Affairs cancelled the brothers' passports. India has also submitted a dossier to Thai authorities and formally

sought deportation.

Thai officials are examining the case, including the brothers' current lack of valid travel documents after passport revocation, embassy sources said.

Legal proceedings may be taken up by a local court in Bangkok, depending on timelines, they added. Lawyers representing the brothers have reached Bangkok and are exploring remedies under Thai law.

Separately, the Bombay High Court converted a civil suit into a PIL. *—Agencies*

Ex-IAS officer Goyal is new Chief Information Commissioner

NEW DELHI, 15 DEC

Former IAS officer Raj Kumar Goyal was on Monday sworn in as Chief Information Commissioner (CIC) by President Droupadi Murmu at Rashtrapati Bhavan.

Goyal, a 1990-batch AGMUT cadre officer retired as Secretary, Department of Justice on 31 August and has previously served as Secretary (Border Management) in the Home Ministry, as well as holding key positions at the Centre and in Jammu and Kashmir.

The CIC post had fallen vacant after Heeralal Samariya completed his term on 13 September.

A three-member panel led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi recommended Goyal's appointment, along with eight

President Droupadi Murmu administers the oath of the office to the Chief Information Commissioner to Raj Kumar Goyal, at Rashtrapati Bhavan in New Delhi *PHOTO: PTI*

Information Commissioners.

Among those selected are former Railway Board chief Jaya Verma Sinha, IPS officer Swagat Das, CSS officer Sanjeev Kumar Jindal, former IAS officer Surendra Singh Meena, ex-Indian Forest Services officer Khushwant Singh Sethi, senior journalists PR Ramesh and Ashutosh Chaturvedi, and Sudha Rani Relangi of PNGRB.

Once they assume office, the Central Information Commission will be at full strength for the first time in over nine years. *—PTI*

Fake CM aide dupes Mumbai man of Rs 74L

MUMBAI, 15 DEC

A man posing as the personal assistant of Maharashtra Chief Minister Devendra Fadnavis and the husband of a deputy commissioner of police was booked for allegedly cheating a businessman of Rs 74 lakh, police said on Monday.

Santacruz police identified the accused as Vaibhav Paresh Thakkar.

According to police sources, the victim, Alpesh Ratilal Patel, met Thakkar in February this year.

Thakkar claimed he was the Chief Minister's Personal Assistant (PA) and said his wife was a Mumbai-based Deputy Commissioner of Police.

He told Patel he could influence and resolve four criminal cases registered against him.

Trusting the claims, Patel paid Rs 74 lakh to Thakkar.

Police said Patel did not initially suspect fraud as Thakkar moved around in a high-end SUV accompanied by bodyguards.

When there was no progress in the cases, Patel confronted Thakkar, who allegedly demanded an additional Rs 76 lakh.

Around the same time, Patel came across a newspaper report about Thakkar's arrest in a cheating case registered at the LT Marg police station.Further probe is underway. *—PTI*

SGD 812M SPENT IN EARLY '25

Indians top luxury spending in Singapore

SINGAPORE, 15 DEC

Indian tourists are among the biggest spenders on luxury goods in Singapore, helping the city-state's high-end retailers buck a global slowdown in premium consumption, a leading business association said on Monday.

Indian travellers spent SGD 812.17 million in Singapore in the first half of 2025, up 4.40 per cent year-on-year, according to Singapore Tourism Board data. "Indian travellers continue to be one of the island's most commercially significant markets and are lifting luxury spending," Orchard Road Business Association (ORBA) chairman Mark Shaw said.

Besides India, tourists from China and Indonesia are also supporting luxury demand, experts noted. Shaw said Indian visitors stay longer than average, at about 6.3 days, translating into higher discretionary spending across retail, dining, entertainment, attractions and accommodation.

The Mastercard Economics Institute's 2024 Travel Trends report said India's growing affluent class is increasingly seeking luxury experiences, jewellery and high-end fashion, driven by rising disposable incomes and aspirational lifestyles.

Indian visitor arrivals reached 1.03 million in the first ten months of 2025, up 2.6 per cent year-on-year, STB data showed. Overall visitor numbers stood at 14.25 million during the period, a 2.5 per cent increase.

According to Euromonitor International, Singapore is among the few major tourism hubs expected to post growth in luxury sales this year, with spending projected to rise 7–9 per cent to about SGD 13.9 billion in 2025. Global luxury brands have expanded their presence along Orchard Road, buoyed by festive demand and tourist footfalls during year-end celebrations across the city economy. *—PTI*

Visitors at the bank of the Yamuna river amid low visibility due to a layer of smog, in New Delhi, which battled toxic fumes on as the air quality slipped into the 'severe' category **PHOTO: PTI**

82% Delhiites have someone ill in their circle

As Delhi vanishes behind a dense-grey curtain and toxic air continues to choke the National Capital Region, a new survey has found that 82 per cent of Delhi-NCR residents have one or more people in their close social network suffering from severe health conditions that they attribute to a long-term exposure to air pollution.

The survey, conducted by community platform LocalCircles, said 28 per cent of the respondents reported having four or more such individuals among family members, friends, neighbours or colleagues.

It said the health conditions include asthma, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, lung damage, heart failure, strokes and cognitive decline, which the respondents linked to a sustained exposure to polluted air.

Delhi choked under a thick blanket of smog on Monday, with the Air Quality Index (AQI) settling at 498, which falls in the higher spectrum of the "severe" category.

The air quality was "severe" at 38 weather-monitoring stations, while it was "very poor" at two. Jahangirpuri, with an AQI reading of 498, recorded the worst air quality among all the 40 stations.

NH-24 on a smoggy winter evening in New Delhi **PHOTO: PTI**

According to the Central Pollution Control Board (CPCB), an AQI between 0 and 50 is considered "good", 51 and 100 "satisfactory", 101 and 200 "moderate", 201 and 300 "poor", 301 and 400 "very poor" and 401 and 500 "severe".

The AQI in Delhi climbed to 461 on Sunday, marking the city's most-polluted day this winter and the second-worst-air-quality day in December on record, as weak winds and low temperatures trapped pollutants close to the surface.

According to the survey, the air quality across large parts of Delhi-NCR has remained in the "very poor" and "severe" categories since late October.

Underlining the scale of the public health crisis in the region, it claimed that fine particulate matter is triggering a sharp rise in cases of respiratory and cardiac ailments, particularly among children, the elderly and those with pre-existing health conditions.

The survey also highlighted a growing anxiety over medical expenses, with 73 per cent of the respondents saying they are worried about being able to afford healthcare for themselves and their families if they continue living in the region amid recurring pollution episodes.

Eight per cent of the respondents said they intend to move out of Delhi-NCR because of the toxic air, while the majority said they are compelled to stay due to work, family responsibilities and other constraints.

The survey received more than 34,000 responses from the residents of Delhi, Gurugram, Noida, Faridabad and Ghaziabad.

LocalCircles stated that it plans to share the findings with government stakeholders, urging for urgent action to address pollution sources and explore healthcare support measures for the affected populations. *—PTI*

Fruit vendors sit around a small fire to warm themselves during a cold and smoggy winter morning, in New Delhi **PHOTO: PTI**

A man gets a haircut at the Yamuna river bank, in Delhi, as others wait in queue amid a thick ayer of smog **PHOTO: PTI**

LETTERS

write to us at salarenglishdigital@gmail.com

Malian women flee from rape by Russian army

The girl lay in a makeshift health clinic, her eyes glazed over and her mouth open, flies resting on her lips. Her chest barely moved. Drops of fevered sweat trickled down her forehead as medical workers hurried around her, attaching an IV drip.

It was the last moment to save her life, said Bethsabee Djoman Elidje, the women's health manager, who led the clinic's effort as the heart monitor beeped rapidly. The girl had an infection after a sexual assault, Elidje said, and had been in shock, untreated, for days.

Her family said the 14-year-old had been raped by Russian fighters who burst into their tent in Mali two weeks earlier. The Russians were members of the Africa Corps, a new military unit under Russia's defence ministry that replaced the Wagner mercenary group six months ago.

Men, women and children have been sexually assaulted by all sides during Mali's decade-long conflict, the UN and aid workers say, with reports of gangrape and sexual slavery. But the real toll is hidden by a veil of shame that makes it difficult for women from conservative, patriarchal societies to seek help.

The AP learned of the alleged rape and four other alleged cases of sexual violence blamed on Africa Corps fighters, commonly described by Malians as the "white men," while interviewing dozens of refugees at the border about other abuses such as beheadings and abductions.

Other combatants in Mali have been blamed for sexual assaults. The head of a women's health clinic in the Mopti area told the AP it had treated 28 women in the last six months who said they had been assaulted by militants with the al-Qaida-affiliated JNIM, the most powerful armed group in Mali.

The silence among Malian refugees has been striking.

Speechless after an assault

The aunt of the 14-year-old girl said the African Corps fighters marched everyone outside at gunpoint. The family couldn't understand what they wanted. The men made them watch as they tied up the girl's uncle and cut off his head.

Then two of the men took the 14-year-old into the tent as she tried to defend herself, and raped her. The family waited outside, unable to move.

The girl emerged over half an hour later, looking terrified. Then she saw her uncle's body and screamed. She fainted. When she woke up, she had the eyes of someone "who was no longer there," the aunt said.

Mother of a Malian woman, treated for high fever and infection at the Douankara clinic in Hodh El Chargui Region, Mauritania **PHOTO: PTI**

The next morning, JNIM militants came and ordered the family to leave. They piled onto a donkey cart and set off toward the border. At any sound, they hid in the bushes, holding their breath.

The girl's condition deteriorated during the three-day journey. When they arrived in Mauritania, she collapsed.

The AP came across her lying on the ground in the courtyard of a local family. Her family said they had not taken her to a clinic because they had no money. The AP took the family to a free clinic run by MSF. A doctor said the girl had signs of having been raped.

The clinic had been functioning for barely a month and had seen three survivors of sexual violence, manager Elidje said.

Thousands of new refugees from Mali, mostly women and children, have settled just inside Mauritania, in shelters made of fabric and branches.

Two recently arrived women discreetly pulled AP journalists aside. They said they had arrived a week ago after armed White men came to their village. "They took everything from us. They burned our houses. They killed our husbands," one said. "But that's not all they did. They tried to rape us."

The men entered the house where she was by herself and undressed her, she said, adding that she defended herself "by the grace of Allah."

As she spoke, the second woman started crying and trembling. She had scratch marks on her neck. She was not capable of telling her story.

Separately, a third woman said that what the White men did to her in Mali last month, when she was alone at home, "stays between God and me."

A fourth said she watched several armed white men drag her 18-year-old daughter into their house. She fled and has not seen her daughter again.

Russia's Defence Ministry did not respond to questions, but an information agency that the US State Department has called part of the "Kremlin's disinformation campaign" called the AP's investigation into Africa Corps fake news.

Wagner has a legacy of sexual abuse

Allegations of rapes and other sexual assaults were already occurring before Wagner transformed into the Africa Corps.

One refugee told the AP she witnessed a mass rape in her village in March 2024.

"The Wagner group burned seven men alive in front of us with gasoline," she said. Then they gathered the women and raped them, she said, including her 70-year-old mother.

"After my mother was raped, she couldn't bear to live," she said. Her mother died a month later.

In the worst-known case of sexual assault involving Russian fighters in Africa, the UN, in a 2023 report, said at least 58 women and girls had been raped in an attack on Moura village by Malian troops and others that witnesses described as "armed White men."

In response, Mali's government expelled the UN peacekeeping mission. Since then, gathering accurate data on the ground about conflict-related sexual violence has become nearly impossible.

The AP interviewed five of the women from Moura, who now stay in a displacement camp. They said they had been blindfolded and raped for hours by several men.

Three of the women said they hadn't spoken about it to anyone apart from aid workers. The other two dared to tell their husbands, months later.

Aid workers are worried about others who never say a thing. *—PTI*

Long, dark history of antisemitism in Australia

Antisemitic incidents have spiked in Australia since the 7 October Hamas attack on Israeli communities outside Gaza and the subsequent Israeli war against Hamas in the coastal strip.

According to the Executive Council of Australian Jewry, there were 368 anti-Jewish incidents reported in Australia between 8 October and 19 November. This compares to a total of 478 antisemitic incidents for the entire year from 2021–22 October.

Liberal MP Julian Leeser, who is Jewish, said: "We're seeing things that I haven't seen before in my lifetime – Jewish children afraid to wear their uniforms to school."

"Yet, antisemitism is not a new phenomenon in Australia. In fact, it has a long history, which I have spent half a century researching."

PROMINENT ANTI-JEWISH VOICES

Jews have been in Australia since the British settlement. They arrived as convicts in chains, yet in the absence of institutional antisemitism, were able to thrive.

In fact, a Jew was elected to the Legislative Assembly in Western Australia in 1848, a full decade before the first Jew was elected to Britain's parliament.

Open antisemitism started to become prevalent in the 1880s with the emergence of Australian nationalism. It was further fuelled by fears of an influx of Jews fleeing Russia.

Despite the small numbers of Russian refugees who did arrive, trade unions, politicians, and the media decried their presence.

By the late 19th and early 20th centuries, anti-Jewish sentiments could be found across the political spectrum.

The Labour Party figure Frank Anstey, for instance, republished his anti-Jewish newspaper articles as a pamphlet in 1915 entitled The Kingdom of Shylock. John Norton, a nationalist publisher and NSW parliamentarian, expressed similar prejudices in his Truth newspaper.

This undercurrent of antisemitism led to the exclusion of Jews from sporting and social clubs and some businesses. Yet, very few Eastern European Jews actually settled in Australia during this time.

The largest wave of Jewish refugees occurred before the Second World War, and again from 1946 to 1954 with Holocaust survivors. They were again met with an antisemitic outcry in Australian newspapers as well as the parliament. Resolutions were passed against Jewish migration.

A woman kneels and prays at a flower memorial to shooting victims outside the Bondi Pavilion at Sydney's Bondi Beach, on Monday **PHOTO: PTI**

ANTI-ZIONIST AGENDA & SOVIET PROPAGANDA

After the war, The Bulletin (Sydney), in particular, continued its anti-Jewish immigration campaign.

In response to the anti-Jewish hysteria, Arthur Calwell, the newly appointed minister of immigration, introduced administrative policies that ensured the Jewish community remained a tiny minority (0.5 per cent) of the population.

These restrictions included a 25 per cent limit on Jewish passengers on ships bound for Australia, which was later extended to planes.

Locally organised antisemitism also emerged in the 1950s and 60s. A young journalist, Eric Butler who promoted the Douglas Social Credit Movement, which implicitly blamed Jews for the Great Depression.

After the war, Butler formed a far-right organisation called the Australian League of Rights, which became a major force in promoting antisemitic libels.

Alongside the nativists were supporters of various Eastern European fascist movements. Some established branches of the antisemitic organisations they had belonged to in Europe, such as the Ustaša, a Croatian fascist movement.

After the 1967 Arab-Israeli war, some on the far left in Australia began promoting an anti-Israel agenda, particularly on university campuses. This anti-Zionist agenda was influenced by Soviet propaganda.

From the late 1950s onwards, the Soviets tried to infiltrate the Middle East to develop an antisemitic and anti-Zionist propaganda machine.

In 1969, the Sovetskaya Rossiya newspaper compared Zionism with fascism, implying Jews were Nazis.

HOW ANTISEMITISM IS EVOLVING TODAY

Research into current antisemitism has demonstrated that it takes three principal forms. It begins with religious anti-Judaism, then mutates into racial antisemitism, and, most recently, political antisemitism associated with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, in which criticisms of Israel can morph into an irrational hatred of Jews..

Spikes in antisemitism are often associated with events in the Middle East and relate to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. The resurgence of White supremacist movements has been another major factor behind antisemitism in recent years.

Since 1989, the Executive Council of Australian Jewry has monitored the level of antisemitism in Australia, and the incidents have risen.

These include abusive emails, mail and phone calls; graffiti; verbal harassment and abuse; and violence.

During the Israel-Hamas conflict in May 2021, Australia saw an increase in verbal abuse online, particularly targeting Jewish students.

The medium is new, but the sentiments are not. Those with antisemitic beliefs continue to propagate traditional anti-Jewish stereotypes, such as the "international Jewish conspiracy" and the "Jewish-Nazi analogy".

Hopefully, a new narrative that is both pro-Israel and pro-Palestine will emerge from the recent conflict.

—The Conversation

PHOTO: XINHUA

Flash floods kill at least 37 people in Moroccan city

CASABLANCA 15 DEC

Floods triggered by torrential rains have killed at least 37 people in the Moroccan coastal city of Safi. Authorities said heavy rain and flash floods overnight inundated about 70 homes and businesses and swept away 10 vehicles. Videos shared on social media showed cars stranded and partially submerged as floodwaters surged through streets. Rains caused flooding throughout Morocco, including the northern city of Tetouan and the mountain town of Tinghir. Schools will also be closed for three days. Safi is a key hub for the country's fishing and mining industries and hosts a major phosphate processing plant in a city of over 3,00,000 people. This week's floods, follow a building collapse in Fez that killed 22, highlighting infrastructure gaps. *—PTI*

IDF kills Hezbollah leaders in strikes on Lebanon

TEL AVIV, 15 DEC

The Israel Defense Forces (IDF) has confirmed the killing of senior Hezbollah terrorist Zakaria Yahya al-Hajj in an airstrike in the Jwaya area of southern Lebanon. This strike follows the elimination of two other Hezbollah operatives within an hour in separate locations. The IDF stated that al-Hajj "played a key role in activating agents within Lebanon's security systems and suppressing criticism of Hezbollah by its opponents." The military described these activities as a significant threat to Israel and a violation of the ceasefire agreements. Additionally, in Yater, a Hezbollah operative involved in re-establishing the group's infrastructure was killed, and in Bint Jbeil, a representative responsible for property seizures was eliminated. *—ANI*

'Emergency' in Guatemala after 5 killed in attack

GUATEMALA CITY, 15 DEC

Guatemalan President Bernardo Arevalo on Sunday declared a state of emergency in two municipalities in western Guatemala after armed men attacked a military post and a police station, resulting in at least five fatalities. Arevalo stated that criminal gangs are trying to force security forces to withdraw, enabling them to assert control over the area. The state of emergency, the first under his administration, will last for 15 days in Nahuala and Santa Catarina Ixtahuacan within Solola. "We are at a critical moment for the department of Solola and the security of the country," Arevalo affirmed, asserting that the communities are not alone in facing this threat. *—PTI*

In AI-era, 'Slop' is Merriam-Webster's word of the year

WASHINGTON, 15 DEC

Amid the rampant use of artifical intelligence, Merriam-Webster selected "slop" as its 2025 word of the year. To select the word of the year, the dictionary's editors review usage data and agree on the term that best reflects the year. Slop was first used in the 1700s to mean soft mud, but it evolved more generally to mean something of little value. The definition has since expanded to mean digital content of low quality that is usually AI generated. Merriam-Webster's president Greg Barlow attibutes the spike in word searches to people's growing awareness and dissatisfaction with fake or shoddy content. Barlow said the word of the year was a mirror to society.

Last year, shortly after the US presidential election, Merriam-Webster chose the word "polarisation". *—PTI*

Australia bats for stricter gun laws after shooting

Says licences should not be lifelong after father-son kill 15

SYDNEY, 15 DEC

Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese on Monday proposed tougher national gun laws after a mass shooting targeted a Hanukkah celebration on Sydney's Bondi Beach, leaving at least 15 people dead.

Albanese said he would propose new restrictions, including limiting the number of guns a licensed owner can obtain. His proposals were announced after the authorities said the older of the two gunmen – who were a father and son – had amassed his six guns legally.

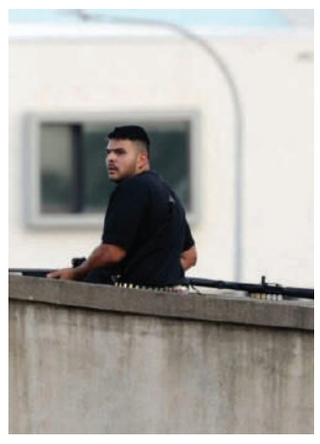
"The government is prepared to take whatever action is necessary. Included in that is the need for tougher gun laws," Albanese told reporters. "People's circumstances can change. People can be radicalised over a period of time. Licences should not be in perpetuity."

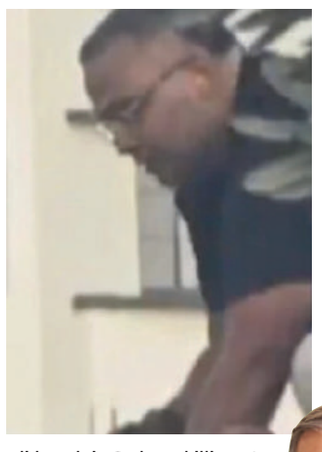
Albanese called the massacre an act of anti-Semitic terrorism, but added that there was no evidence to link them to a larger terror-cell. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu had claimed that such an attack was "inevitable" following Australia's recognition of a Palestinian state.

He pledged swift change, planning on Monday afternoon to present his gun law proposals to a national cabinet meeting that includes state leaders. Some of the measures would also require state legislation.

At least 40 people were being treated in hospitals after the massacre on Sunday, when the two shooters fired indiscriminately. Those killed included a 10-year-old girl, a rabbi and a Holocaust survivor.

The horror at Australia's most popular beach was the deadliest shooting in almost three decades in Australia. The country has strict gun control laws primarily aimed at removing rapid-fire rifles from circulation. Australia's gun laws were revised after a 1996 massacre in the Tasmanian town of Port Arthur, where a lone gunman killed 35 people. *—PTI*





A father-son duo had opened fire on Bondi beach in Sydney, killing at least 15 people **PHOTO: SCREENGRAB**

> **People's circumstances can change. People can be radicalised over a period of time. Licences should not be in perpetuity**
>
> —Anthony Albanese

Hong Kong's former media mogul Jimmy Lai convicted

HONG KONG, 15 DEC

Jimmy Lai, Hong Kong's pro-democracy outspoken critic of Beijing, was convicted in a national security case on Monday, which could send him to prison for life.

Three government-vetted judges in Hong Kong found the 78-year-old former media mogul guilty of conspiring with others to collude with foreign forces to endanger national security and conspiracy to publish seditious articles. He had rejected all charges.

Lai was arrested in August 2020 under a Beijing-imposed national security law that was implemented following massive anti-government protests in 2019. During his five years in custody, much of it in solitary confinement, Lai has been convicted of several lesser offences and appears to have grown frail.

The court said Lai spent years plotting against Beijing

Lai's trial, conducted without a jury, has been closely monitored by the US, Britain, the European Union and political observers as a barometer of media freedom and judicial independence in Hong Kong.

Reading from an 855-page verdict, Judge Esther Toh said that the founder of the now defunct Apple Daily had extended an "invitation" to the US to help bring down the Chinese government giving the excuse of helping Hong Kongers.

Lai's lawyers admitted during the trial that he had called for sanctions before the law took effect, but insisted he dropped these calls to comply with the law.

But the judges ruled that Lai had never wavered in his intention to destabilise the ruling Chinese Communist Party. *— PTI*

- Lai was arrested in August 2020 under a Beijing-imposed national security law. The court said Lai spent years plotting against Beijing and even conspired with the US

BYSTANDER WHO DISARMED GUNMAN HERALDED AS HERO

SYDNEY, 15 DEC

A bystander seen in a widely circulated video disarming a gunman during a deadly shooting rampage at a popular Australian beach is being heralded as a hero who saved lives by officials and his relative.

Video footage shows a passerby, Ahmed al Ahmed, crouching behind a parked car before sneaking up behind a gunman, grabbing him and wrestling away his firearm. The bystander then points the weapon at the gunman.

Ahmed was shot twice, with wounds to his arm and hand and needed to undergo surgery, according to his cousin Mustafa. He said his cousin is a fruit shop owner and father of two from Sydney.

"We hope he will be fine," Mustafa said. "He's a hero. One hundred percent, he's a hero." *—PTI*

Bystander Ahmed al Ahmed, disarming an attacker **PHOTO: X**

Cambodia claims Thailand bombing civilian shelters as conflict continues

MONGKOL BOREY, 15 DEC

Heavy combat between Thailand and Cambodia entered a second week on Monday, with Phnom Penh claiming that Thai bombing is hitting deeper into its territory, coming close to shelters for people who had already fled dangerous areas along the border.

According to Cambodia's Defence and Information Ministries Thai F-16 fighter jets dropped two bombs on Monday morning near camps for displaced people in the Chong Kal district in the Oddar Meanchey province and the Srei Snam district in the Siem Reap province, 70km inside Cambodian territory.

Siem Reap is home to Cambodia's world-famous Angkor Wat temple complex, a UNESCO World Heritage site and the country's biggest tourist attraction.

Thailand also confirmed attempting to cut off fuel supplies to Cambodia, but denied instating a naval blockade.

Thailand said 505 Cambodian military personnel have been killed, which Phnom Penh has denied. Thailand has said 16 of its soldiers have been killed.

Phnom Penh said that 15 civilians have been killed, while Thailand confirmed its first civilian casualty on Sunday. *—PTI*

Evacuees line up to receive soup as they take refuge in Wat Prasat Srahkandal, Banteay Menchey province, Cambodia **PHOTO: PTI**

Syrian who killed 3 US citizens recently joined security forces

BEIRUT, 15 DEC

A man who carried out an attack in Syria that killed three US citizens had joined Syria's internal security forces as a base security guard two months earlier and was recently reassigned amid suspicions that he might be affiliated with the Islamic State group, a Syrian official said on Sunday.

The attack Saturday in the Syrian desert near the historic city of Palmyra killed two US service members and one American interpreter and wounded three others. It also wounded three members of the Syrian security forces who clashed with the gunman.

The attacker was among 5,000 members who recently joined a new division in the internal security forces.

The new interim government had to recruit people rapidly as it faced staff shortages after coming to power last year. *—PTI*

STANDING TALL

Uttarakhand's Kavita Chand conquers Mount Vinson, Antarctica's highest peak, and poses with the Tricolour on 12 December, achieving a major milestone in her Seven Summits challenge **PHOTO: PTI**

AUTHORITIES TO RELEASE 'PERSON OF INTEREST' IN BROWN SHOOTING

PROVIDENCE, 15 DEC

Authorities have announced that a person of interest detained in connection with a shooting at Brown University, which resulted in the deaths of two students and injuries to nine others, will be released. This decision comes as investigations have taken law enforcement in a "different direction".

The shooting on Saturday occurred amid final exams, causing significant panic on campus as police initiated an extensive search for the shooter. The individual in custody was identified as a 24-year-old man from Wisconsin.

"We know that this is likely to cause fresh anxiety for our community," remarked Mayor Brett Smiley. Authorities have yet to establish a potential motive and confirmed that no charges have been filed against anyone to date.

The gunman unleashed more than 40 rounds from a 9mm handgun. *—PTI*

LOUVRE WORKERS STRIKE OVER SECURITY, STAFF SHORTAGE

PARIS, 15 DEC

Workers at the Louvre Museum voted on Monday to strike over working conditions, security and other complaints, dealing another blow to the Paris museum after an embarrassing jewellery heist in October.

The world's most-visited museum didn't open as scheduled and turned would-be visitors away. A notice on the Louvre's website advised would-be visitors that "the museum is closed for the moment."

The strike vote followed talks last week between labour unions and the government, including Culture Minister Rachida Dati. Labour leaders said the talks had not alleviated all of their concerns.

For employees, the daylight jewel heist crystallised long-standing concerns that crowding and thin staffing are undermining security and working conditions. *—PTI*

Europe rallies behind Ukraine amid US' peace deal

BERLIN, 15 DEC

European leaders are expected to cement support for Ukraine on Monday as it faces Washington's pressure to swiftly accept a US-brokered peace deal.

Peace talks between US envoys and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, as well as Ukrainian and European officials, continued Monday morning. The second day of talks in Berlin began shortly before noon local time.

Finnish President Alexander Stubb, one of the key European interlocutors between US President Donald Trump and Zelenskyy, was spotted Monday morning in downtown Berlin.

Zelenskyy sat down Sunday with Trump's special envoy Steve Witkoff and Trump's son-in-law Jared Kushner in the German federal chancellery in the hopes of bringing the nearly four-year war to a close. He signalled that he was willing to drop Ukraine's NATO bid in exchange for legally binding security guarantees.

The US government said that after the five-hour meeting that "a lot of progress was made."

Meanwhile drone strikes continued, but casualties were not reported at the time of publishing. *—PTI*

ACCLAIMED DIRECTOR-ACTOR

Rob Reiner, wife found 'murdered' at home

LOS ANGELES, 15 DEC

Acclaimed director-actor Rob Reiner and his wife Michele were found dead on Sunday at their Los Angeles home. Investigators believe they suffered stab wounds. Detectives with the Robbery Homicide Division were investigating an "apparent homicide" at Reiner's home, said Captain Mike Bland with the Los Angeles Police Department. Their son, Nick Reiner, is being held in jail on USD 4 million bail, according to sources.

The Los Angeles Fire Department said it responded to a medical aid request shortly after 3.30pm on Sunday and found a 78-year-old man and 68-year-old woman dead inside.

Reiner was long one of the most prolific directors in Hollywood, and his work included some of the most memorable movies of the 1980s and '90s, including 'This is Spinal Tap,' 'A Few Good Men,' 'When Harry Met Sally' and 'The Princess Bride.'

His role as Meathead in the 1970s TV classic 'All in the Family' alongside Carol O'Connor's Archie Bunker catapulted him to fame and won him two Emmy Awards.

The son of comedy legend Carl Reiner, Rob Reiner was married to photographer Michele Singer Reiner since 1989. The two met while he was directing 'When Harry Met Sally' and have three children together.

He was previously married to actor-director Penny Marshall from 1971 to 1981. He adopted her daughter, Tracy Reiner. Carl Reiner died in 2020 at age 98 and Marshall died in 2018.

Tributes poured in from politicians and the film fraternity. *—PTI*

Director-actor Rob Reiner and his wife Michele **PHOTO: FB**

The Right rises in Chile's Presidential elections

SANTIAGO, 15 DEC

Ultra-Conservative former lawmaker José Antonio Kast secured a decisive victory in Chile's presidential election on Sunday, defeating Communist Jeannette Jara and setting the stage for the country's most right-wing government since its return to democracy in 1990.

Kast won 58.2 per cent of the votes as Chileans overwhelmingly embraced his pledge to crack down on increased crime, deport hundreds of thousands of immigrants without legal status and revive the sluggish economy of one of Latin America's most stable and prosperous nations.

Kast was declared the winner less than two hours after polls closed, as Jara, a former labour minister, said the party accepts the results of democracy.

Kast's election represents the latest in a string of votes that have turfed out incumbent governments across Latin America, vaulting right-wing leaders to power from Argentina to Bolivia.

Kast is a devout Catholic and father of nine whose German-born father was a registered member of Adolf Hitler's Nazi party and whose brother served as a minister in the dictatorship. *—PTI*

José Antonio Kast **PHOTO: X**

Cognizant starts cyber defence centre in B'luru

NEW DELHI, 15 DEC

Cognizant on Monday launched a cyber defence centre in Bengaluru, a key hub in its global CDC network, and the largest facility geared to deliver advanced AI-led platform-centric cybersecurity managed services, engineering and transformation services to clients worldwide. At the Bengaluru CDC, specialists aim to provide round-the-clock monitoring and rapid response to security incidents, supporting clients across diverse industries and geographies, Cognizant said. The centre has an integrated threat research lab, backed by strategic alliances with leading technology companies. "Cybersecurity is entering a new era where hyper-connected enterprises and AI-driven threats outpace traditional defences," Ravi Kumar S, CEO of Cognizant, noted. To support a steady pipeline of skilled talent, the centre has partnered with leading academic institutions to train next-generation cybersecurity professionals. —*PTI*

Wheels India, Japan's Topy ink pact for wheels

NEW DELHI, 15 DEC

Wheels India has signed a technical assistance agreement with Japan's Topy Industries to support the manufacture of aluminium alloy wheels, with Topy providing technical engineering support and design assistance. Commenting on the agreement, Wheels India Managing Director Srivats Ram said, "This agreement will help us win new businesses and bolster our competitive advantage in the cast aluminium segment. Through this partnership, we also hope to make fresh inroads with Japanese OEMs in India in the alloy wheel segment." Wheels India already has a joint venture with Topy for steel wheels business through WIL Car Wheels Ltd with a 74 per cent equity holding. This JV is focused on steel wheels for the Japanese OEMs (Original Equipment Manufacturers) in India. —*PTI*

Exports up 19.37% to $38.13B in November: Govt

NEW DELHI, 15 DEC

India's exports rebounded by 19.37 per cent to USD 38.13 billion in November after contracting in October, driven by higher shipments of engineering and electronics goods that helped bring down the trade deficit to a five-month low of USD 24.53 billion. According to government data released on Monday, the country's imports dipped by 1.88 per cent to USD 62.66 billion due to a fall in the inbound shipments of gold, crude oil, coal, and coke during the month under review. The trade deficit stood at a record USD 41.68 billion in October. Cumulatively, exports during April-November were up 2.62 per cent to USD 292.07 billion, while imports rose by 5.59 per cent to USD 515.21 billion. The deficit stood at USD 223.14 billion. —*PTI*

India's sugar output jumps 28% in 2025-26

NEW DELHI, 15 DEC

India's sugar production has surged 28.33 per cent so far this season to 77.90 lakh tonnes, but cooperative mills federations (NFCSF) have urged the government to raise the minimum selling price, citing falling ex-mill prices and rising costs that threaten farmer payments. Mills face cane payment obligations of over Rs 1.30 lakh crore this season, while surplus stocks could block nearly Rs 28,000 crore in working capital, the federation said. The federation has submitted detailed proposals to the Prime Minister and the food minister seeking to raise the minimum selling price to Rs 41 per kg and permit an additional 5 lakh tonnes of sugar to be diverted for ethanol production, which it estimates to generate nearly Rs 20 billion. —*PTI*

Wholesale price inflation at -0.32% in November

This is the second consecutive month the WPI is at negative

NEW DELHI, 15 DEC

PHOTO: PTI

Wholesale price inflation stayed in the negative for the second consecutive month in November at (-) 0.32 per cent, even though there was an uptick in prices of food articles like pulses and vegetables on a month-on-month basis, government data showed on Monday.

Wholesale Price Index (WPI)-based inflation was at (-) 1.21 per cent in October and 2.16 per cent in November last year. However, on an annual basis, the negative rate of inflation during November was primarily due to decrease in prices of food articles, mineral oils, crude petroleum & natural gas, manufacture of basic metals and electricity, the industry ministry said in a statement.

Food articles continued to witness deflation for the past eight months, beginning in April. It narrowed sharply in November at 4.16 per cent, from 8.31 per cent in October.

In vegetables, deflation was 20.23 per cent in November, as against 34.97 per cent in October.

In pulses, deflation was at 15.21 per cent in November, while in potato and onion it was 36.14 per cent and 64.70 per cent, respectively.

In the case of manufactured products, inflation eased to 1.33 per cent in November, as against 1.54 per cent in October.

Fuel and power witnessed a negative inflation or deflation of 2.27 per cent, as against 2.55 per cent in October.

ICRA Chief Economist Aditi Nayar said the WPI deflation narrowed faster than expected to 0.3 per cent in November 2025, from 1.2 per cent in October 2025, reflecting the base effect, weakening INR and rising prices of some commodities.

Data released last week showed CPI inched up to 0.71 per cent in November, from a record low of 0.25 per cent, driven by rising food prices.

Low inflation in the current fiscal year has given the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) room to cut policy interest rates by 1.25 percentage points. —*PTI*

SMALLCAP CLIMBS 0.41%

Markets close lower amid foreign fund outflows

MUMBAI, 15 DEC

Benchmark stock indices Sensex and Nifty pared most of early losses to close marginally down on Monday amid persistent foreign fund outflows and weak global trends.

The 30-share BSE Sensex closed lower by 54.30 points, or 0.06 per cent, at 85,213.36. The benchmark opened lower and declined further by 427.34 points, or 0.50 per cent, to hit a low of 84,840.32, but value buying in FMCG and IT shares in the second half helped cut losses.

The 50-share NSE Nifty edged lower by 19.65 points, or 0.08 per cent, to 26,027.30. The broader index hit a low of 25,904.75 but pared losses later.

The rupee hitting fresh record low against the US dollar and uncertainty over an India-US trade deal weighed on investor sentiment, analysts said. The rupee hit an all-time low of 90.80 against the US dollar on Monday.

Among Sensex firms, Mahindra & Mahindra fell the most by 1.94 per cent. Bajaj Finserv fell by 0.79 per cent and Maruti Suzuki by 0.71 per cent. Adani Ports, Bharti Airtel, Titan, Power Grid and HDFC Bank were also among the laggards.

However, Hindustan Unilever surged the most by 1.42 per cent. Trent, HCL Tech, Asian Paints, and Tata Steel were among the gainers.

The BSE smallcap gauge climbed 0.41 per cent and midcap index went up by 0.16 per cent.Among sectoral indices, telecommunication declined 0.90 per cent, followed by auto (0.87 per cent), consumer discretionary (0.25 per cent), financial services (0.11 per cent). —*PTI*

'WORST PERFORMER'

Forex traders says rupee unable to find support amid strong USD

MUMBAI, 15 DEC

PHOTO: PTI

Forex traders said prevailing risk-averse market sentiment, compounded by strong US dollar demand from importers, further dented investor sentiment.

Despite the better-than-expected trade balance number, the rupee took a hit a fresh low, falling by 29 paise, closing at 90.78 against US dollar.

"The Indian rupee plunged to a record low, positioning it as the worst performer among the Asian currencies. Despite the better-than-expected trade balance number, the rupee was unable to find support," said Dilip Parmar, Research Analyst, HDFC Securities.

Parmar further noted, "This lack of resilience is primarily attributed to a significant demand-supply imbalance, driven by high dollar demand from importers and persistent capital outflows, which remain the biggest concerns for the currency."

"In the near term, the technical bias for the spot USD-INR pair remains bullish, with key resistance at 90.95 and support at 90.50," Parmar added.

Meanwhile, Commerce Secretary Rajesh Agrawal on Monday said India and the US are "very close" on the framework deal.

"We are very close on the framework deal, which we feel can be done in a short period of time. But I would not like to put a time period on that," he told reporters here.

The two countries are conducting parallel negotiations -- one on a framework trade deal to address high tariffs and another on a comprehensive bilateral trade agreement (BTA).

Anuj Choudhary, Research Analyst, MiraeAsset ShareKhan, said the rupee the rupee is expected to trade with a negative bias amid delay in Indo-US trade deal and FII outflows. "A weak dollar and any intervention by the RBI may also support the rupee at lower levels. Investors may watch of for central bank monetary policy decisions from BOE, ECB and BoJ. USD-INR spot price is expected to trade in a range of Rs 90.30 to Rs 91," Choudhary said. —*PTI*

GOLD PRICES HIT NEW RECORD HIGH OF RS 1.37 LAKH/10G

NEW DELHI, 15 DEC

Gold prices surged by Rs 4,000 to touch an all-time high of Rs 1,37,600 per 10g in the national capital on Monday, tracking firm global cues, according to the All India Sarafa Association.

The precious metal of 99.9 per cent purity had closed at Rs 1,33,600 per 10g on Friday.

Gold prices had earlier appreciated by Rs 3,200 to touch an all-time high of Rs 1,34,800 per 10g on October 17.

During the current calendar year, gold prices have surged Rs 58,650, or 74.3 per cent, from Rs 78,950 per 10g on December 31, 2024.

On the other hand, silver prices remained flat at Rs 1,99,500 (inclusive of all taxes), as per the association.

So far in this year, silver prices have skyrocketed by Rs 1,09,800, or 122.41 per cent, compared with Rs 89,700 per kilogram on December 31, 2024.

In the international markets, spot gold rallied for the fifth consecutive session, rising USD 49.83, or 1.16 per cent, to USD 4,350.06 per ounce.

Over the past five sessions, the yellow metal has added USD 159.32, or 3.80 per cent, from USD 4,190.74 per ounce recorded on December 8.

"Spot gold trading with a positive bias as the Federal Reserve not only cut the rate into elevated inflation, it is also adding liquidity to the system by buying Treasury bills," Praveen Singh, Research Analyst, Mirae Asset ShareKhan, said.

Meanwhile, spot silver advanced by USD 2, or 3.24 per cent, to USD 63.96 per ounce in the overseas markets. On Friday, the white metal had touched a lifetime high of USD 64.65 per ounce. —*PTI*

ED questions Yes Bank's co-founder in Anil Ambani case

NEW DELHI, 15 DEC

The Enforcement Directorate (ED) has questioned Yes Bank co-founder **Rana Kapoor** as part of an ongoing money laundering investigation involving the Reliance Anil Ambani Group. His statement was recorded under the Prevention of Money Laundering Act (PMLA), officials confirmed.

Kapoor, aged 68, has previously been arrested and interrogated by the ED concerning separate money laundering cases linked to alleged illegal loan disbursals from Yes Bank, which he led. Authorities suspect a quid pro quo arrangement between Kapoor and Ambani in this case.

As of 31 March, 2017, Yes Bank had a financial exposure of approximately Rs 6,000 crore to the Reliance Anil Ambani Group (ADAG), a figure that doubled to Rs 13,000 crore by the following year. The ED claims that a significant portion of these investments became non-performing assets, resulting in a loss of Rs 3,300 crore for the bank.

Officials allege that these transactions were not standard business dealings but rather reciprocal agreements whereby ADAG companies provided loans to firms controlled by Kapoor's family. Investigations also revealed that Kapoor and Ambani likely conducted private meetings regarding these arrangements.

The probe primarily covers the period from 2017 to 2019, during which Yes Bank invested Rs 4,959 crore in Reliance Home Finance Limited and Reliance Commercial Finance Limited. The ED has previously attached assets worth Rs 1,120 crore linked to certain Anil Ambani Group companies. —*PTI*

User's consent mandatory for WhatsApp to collect data

NEW DELHI, 15 DEC

Appellate tribunal NCLAT on Monday clarified that its order in the WhatsApp matter on privacy and consent safeguards also applies to user data collection and sharing for non-WhatsApp purposes, including non-advertising and advertising.

Passing an order over an application moved by CCI seeking clarification over the previous order passed by NCLAT, the appellate tribunal said, "Appellant (WhatsApp and Meta) cannot assert unilateral or open-ended rights over user data.

"We had clearly held that 'users must retain the right to decide what data is collected, for which purposes and for how long. Any non-essential collection or cross-use like advertising etc. can occur only with the concerned users' express and revocable consent," said NCLAT.

It further said that once users are given the option to opt in or opt out of data sharing at any stage, whether using regular features or optional features, their rights are protected for all time, and exploitation is removed, which has been an issue with 2021 WhatsApp policy. —*PTI*

ICICI Prudential AMC IPO fully subscribed on day 2

NEW DELHI, 15 DEC

The initial public offering (IPO) of ICICI Prudential Asset Management Company Ltd, an arm of the ICICI Bank, got fully subscribed on the second day of share sale on Monday.

The IPO received bids for 4,97,60,868 shares against 3,50,15,691 shares on offer, translating into 1.42 times subscription, according to NSE data till 1.27pm. Non-institutional investors portion received 2.32 times subscription, while the quota for Qualified Institutional Buyers (QIBs) got subscribed 2.04 times. Retail Individual Investors (RIIs) category received 61 per cent subscription.

ICICI Prudential Asset Management Company (AMC) on Thursday said it has raised Rs 3,022 crore from anchor investors. The company has fixed a price band of Rs 2,061 to Rs 2,165 per share for the issue, valuing it at about Rs 1.07 lakh crore (USD 11.86 billion). The IPO is an entirely offer-for-sale of more than 4.89 crore shares by its promoter, UK-based Prudential Corporation Holdings, meaning the company will not receive any proceeds from the offering. The share sale would conclude on Tuesday.

Currently, ICICI Bank holds 51 per cent in the AMC, while Prudential owns the remaining 49 per cent. —*PTI*

Wakefit makes muted market debut

Shares of home and furnishing company Wakefit Innovations Ltd on Monday made a muted market debut against the issue price of Rs 195.

The stock started trading at Rs 194.10, down 0.46 per cent from the issue price on the BSE.

Later, it declined 9.10 per cent to Rs 177.25. At the NSE, the stock was listed at par with the issue price of Rs 195.

AHEAD OF IPO

Flipkart gets nod to move domicile back to India

BENGALURU, 15 DEC

E-commerce major Flipkart has received the National Company Law Tribunal's (NCLT) nod to move the domicile of its holding company from Singapore to India, said sources familiar with the matter.

According to sources, this plays an important role in the preparation of Flipkart's domestic initial public offering (IPO).

The approval comes after the Walmart-owned firm's earlier disclosure that it is working to relocate the firm's legal base to India, sources said.

The company said that the relocation was a part of a broader plan to simplify its structure ahead of the public listing.

With NCLT's approval in effect, the e-commerce company will now be able to move ahead with the remaining legal and regulatory steps needed for the reverse flip, which is a process involving the transfer of ownership of the overseas holding entity to an Indian entity, along with combining a local group structure, said sources.

Flipkart, which shifted its headquarters to Singapore in 2011, with its relocation plans to improve its reach in the Indian capital markets and push for a stronger domestic listing, it added. —*Agencies*

- With NCLT's approval in effect, the e-commerce company will now be able to move ahead with the remaining legal and regulatory steps needed for the reverse flip

FLIPKART'S MAJOR SHAREHOLDERS

- Walmart – Majority owner
- Tencent
- Tiger Global
- Alphabet
- DTS Global
- Microsoft
- SoftBank
- General Insurance Corporation of India

3 hospitality groups win Andaman luxury resorts bid

SRI VIJAYA PURAM, 15 DEC

Three prominent hospitality groups have secured bids to establish luxury eco-friendly resorts at Long Island, Aves Island, and Shaheed Dweep (Neil Island) in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, according to an official announcement.

The Andaman and Nicobar Islands Integrated Development Corporation Limited (ANIIDCO) finalised the tenders for three 5-star eco-tourism resorts, with another group awarded the development of the Megapode Resort in Sri Vijaya Puram on a Public-Private Partnership (PPP) basis.

"We have finalised successful tenders for four flagship eco-tourism projects across the Islands," stated the official.

Concessionaires will share revenue, with rates set at 3.6 per cent for Megapode Resort, 3 per cent for Shaheed Dweep, and 2 per cent each for Long Island and Aves Island.

The concession period is 50 years for Megapode and 75 years for the others. —*PTI*

MESSI WINDS UP GOAT INDIA TOUR IN DELHI

NEW DELHI, 15 DEC

The Lionel Messi GOAT India Tour that began in shambolic fashion ended in a blaze of glory as devotional fans joyously gathered to catch a glimpse of a man who does things on the field that are often beyond human comprehension. Messi, who was in Mumbai for the second day of his three-day whirlwind trip to India, was to land in the national capital around 10:45 am, but his charter flight was held up due to foggy conditions here.

Most importantly, the much-publicised and anticipated event had the ending it wanted, after a chaotic beginning in Kolkata on the tour's first stop on Saturday.

The thousands of heads totting the stands at Kotla, as well as the few Indian celebrities and dignitaries inside the ground, basked in the euphoria of hosting one of the world's most recognisable and bankable athletes at an extravagant event.They were perhaps swept away by the otherworldly talent, the humility, and the impact that this man has had on the game he has played with all his might over the last two decades.

Speaking briefly in Spanish, a language not spoken by most in the city, Messi said, "Gracias, Delhi! Hasta pronto, creating a sense of yearning among the crowds rarely seen before. "So, we carry all this love with us, and we will definitely return, hopefully one day to play a match or on another occasion, **but we will definitely return to visit India**. Thank you very much."

He was then standing there waving to the stands, smiling, something he tried to do in Kolkata too, but could not, as, unlike the Arun Jaitley Stadium, he was crowded by too many people, including politicians and their aides, at the Salt Lake Stadium on Saturday. Messi felicitated the Minerva Academy team, and he also played football with the kids after a photo with them. The trio shook hands with them and exchanged smiles. —*PTI*

Argentine footballer Lionel Messi plays football with fans during the final leg of his GOAT India Tour 2025 **PHOTO: PTI**

PHOTO: PTI

Axar ruled out of remaining T20Is against SA

NEW DELHI, 15 DEC

India all-rounder Axar Patel was on Monday ruled out of the remaining two T20 Internationals against South Africa due to illness, with the BCCI's selection committee naming Shahbaz Ahmed as his replacement. Axar had also missed the third T20I in Dharamsala on Sunday, with wrist spinner Kuldeep Yadav being included in the playing XI. India went on to defeat South Africa by seven wickets in a low-scoring match to take a 2-1 lead in the five-match series. The last two games of the five-match series will be played in Lucknow and Ahmedabad on Wednesday and Friday, respectively. Team India allrounder, Axar Patel, has been ruled out of the remaining two IDFC First Bank T20Is against South Africa due to illness.—*PTI*

Chotrani, Semwal to take part in CCI squash tournament

MUMBAI, 15 DEC

Veer Chotrani, Anjali Semwal, and Suraj Chand will be among the prominent players to take part in the 80th edition of the CCI Western India Squash Tournament here from 17-21 December. The tournament is organised under the Squash Rackets Federation of India and the Maharashtra Squash Rackets Association and will be played at six glass-backed courts here at the Cricket Club of India. The rise of multiple Indian players in the PSA World Top 100, including Sourav Ghoshal's and Joshna Chinappa's historic surge into the Top 10, underlines the event's impact on India's professional squash ecosystem, particularly its role in advancing world-class women athletes.—*PTI*

PHOTO: X/@SL

Former Sri Lanka cricketer Dammika arrested

COLOMBO, 15 DEC

Former Sri Lankan Test cricketer and elder brother of World Cup-winning captain Arjuna Ranatunga, Dammika, was arrested by the country's anti-graft commission and later released on bail on Monday.The Commission to Investigate Bribery or Corruption said the 63-year-old Dammika was arrested for wrong tendering procedure in the purchase of crude oil by state entity Ceylon Petroleum Corporation (CPC) in 2017, when he was its chairman. CIABOC said Dammika's undue influence had caused a loss of 800 million Sri Lankan rupees to CPC. CIABOC told the Colombo Magistrate Court that Dammika's younger brother, Arjuna, had been named as the second accused in the case.—*PTI*

PSL to be held from 26 March next year: PCB chief

KARACHI, 15 DEC

The 11th edition of the Pakistan Super League (PSL) will be held from March 26 to May 3 next year, clashing with the Indian Premier League's window for a second successive season and forcing a rejig of the national team's international schedule. Pakistan Cricket Board (PCB) Chairman Mohsin Naqvi made this announcement at the PSL roadshow in New York on Sunday. The IPL also traditionally starts in the last week of March and goes on till the end of May every year. Naqvi said that any international commitments of the Pakistan team in this window will be readjusted, including a tour of Bangladesh.—*PTI*

2 Hazare games must for all players, not just Ro-Ko: BCCI

Diktat has been communicated to the players by Ajit Agarkar

NEW DELHI, 15 DEC

The BCCI on Monday has made it mandatory for all current national team players to turn up in at least two one-day matches of the upcoming Vijay Hazare Trophy starting 24 December.

It is understood that with a gap of three weeks between the last T20I against South Africa in Ahmedabad (19 December) and the first ODI against New Zealand (11 January, 2026), the Board wants all its senior players to play domestic cricket.

The diktat has been communicated to the players by the Ajit Agarkar-led national selection committee.

This is in line with the recommendations of a review that was undertaken after the Test debacle in Australia earlier this year. The review had sought greater emphasis on domestic cricket across formats.

While veterans Virat Kohli and Rohit Sharma have already intimated their availability for the tournament, other senior stars like Shubman Gill, Jasprit Bumrah, KL Rahul, Hardik Pandya and Suryakumar Yadav have also been asked to play at least two games for their respective teams.

"There are six rounds of Vijay Hazare Trophy scheduled between 24 December and the start of the New Zealand ODIs.

It is up to the players and their state associations to decide which two rounds they would like to play. "But after the second T20I in Mullanpur, the players have been categorically told that playing Hazare isn't optional," a senior BCCI official told PTI on conditions of anonymity. Exceptions would be made only if a player is declared unfit by the Centre of Excellence, but officials believe there is enough time to recuperate after the South Africa series. The diktat would also help counter the narrative that the selection committee and head coach Gambhir only want to make an example out of Kohli and Rohit, who have nothing to prove. —*PTI*

India's new ball bowlers made life difficult for us: Markram

India's new-ball bowlers and their own team's failure to deal with the general challenge of higher dot balls in a low-scorer led to South Africa's loss in the third T20 International against India, visiting skipper Aiden Markram has said on Monday. The pace duo of Arshdeep Singh and Harshit Rana struck early to leave South Africa reeling at 7 for 3 inside the first four overs, a setback from which the visitors never recovered as they slumped to a seven-wicket loss after posting just 117. The result gave India a 2-1 lead in the five-match series. "They got the ball in the right areas, and before you know it, you're four, five, six down.

IPL AUCTION

Cameron Green, Venkatesh Iyer & Livingstone in focus

ABU DHABI, 15 DEC

Cameron Green could well be the biggest beneficiary of IPL's skewed demand-supply market dynamic surrounding seam-bowling all-rounders during the mini-auction here on Tuesday, with Kolkata Knight Riders and Chennai Super Kings seemingly ready to break the bank for the Australian.The 10 teams need to fill up 77 slots with a cumulative purse of Rs 237.55 crore, and among them, the Mumbai Indians (Rs 2.75 crore) will hardly have any role to play, save picking a few uncapped players at their base price.

Green, along with out-of-favour India all-rounder Venkatesh Iyer and English dasher Liam Livingstone, is likely to enjoy a handsome payday.

There is buzz that Green might surpass countryman Mitchell Starc (Rs 24.75 crore) to become the overseas player with the highest price tag at an IPL auction, but there would remain a catch.

Even if Green's bid goes northwards of Rs 25 crore, his salary for the season would still be Rs 18 crore (USD 1.9 million).For Livingstone, destroying Rashid Khan's mystery by smashing him for 26 runs in a 'Hundred' game for Birmingham Phoenix is likely to make him a sought-after name. Matheesha Pathirana was released by CSK, but teams like Lucknow Super Giants (purse of Rs 22.95 crore) might bid aggressively as their fast bowling resources look depleted despite the presence of Mohammed Shami and a perennially injured Mayank Yadav.

In the case of Venkatesh, it will be interesting if his bid value goes over and above Rs 10 crore (USD 1.1 million) —*PTI*

BBL: Shaheen Afridi removed from bowling mid-over

MELBOURNE, 15 DEC

Pakistan pacer Shaheen Afridi's Big Bash League (BBL) debut for the Brisbane Heat did not go as expected, as he was removed from attack mid-over in Melbourne on Monday.

In the game against Melbourne Renegades, Afridi bowled two waist-high no-balls in his third over, which resulted in the subsequent suspension from bowling further in the match. The Heat skipper Nathan McSweeny completed Afridi's over.

In his 2.4-over spell, the 25-year-old conceded 43 runs without picking up a wicket.

Afridi was the Heat's number one pick at the BBL draft ahead of the 15th season. Overall in T20Is, Afridi has taken 126 wickets and gone for less than eight runs an over in 96 matches. —*PTI*

Wankhede to host Physical Disability T20 Series

MUMBAI, 15 DEC

The iconic Wankhede Stadium in Mumbai will host a three-match Physical Disability T20 Series between India and India A teams from December 16 to 18, the parent body Differently Abled Cricket Council of India (DCCI) announced on Monday.

The three-day T20 series aims to promote inclusivity, resilience, and sporting excellence, while highlighting the growing stature of physical disability cricket on the national and international stage.

Unmesh Khanvilkar, General Secretary of the Mumbai Cricket Association (MCA), said: "Hosting the Physical Disability Cricket Series for the very first time is a proud milestone for MCA — celebrating resilience, redefining ability, and reaffirming that cricket truly belongs to everyone.

"Our President, Mr. Ajinkya Naik, is deeply committed to promoting and celebrating physical disability cricket, and we will continue to extend our full support."

DCCI General Secretary Ravi Chauhan expressed his excitement, stating, "DCCI extends its heartfelt gratitude to MCA for hosting physical disability cricket. Your commitment to inclusivity and opportunity has strengthened the spirit of the game and empowered our athletes to shine." —*PTI*

NATIONAL SHOOTING

Manu Bhaker, Simranpreet Kaur Brar win 25m pistol gold

NEW DELHI, 15 DEC

Double Olympic bronze medallist Manu Bhaker and World Cup Final gold medallist Simranpreet Kaur Brar dished out commanding performances to clinch the senior and junior women's 25m pistol titles respectively at the National Shooting Championship Competitions, here on Monday.

Manu shot 36 in the final to secure the gold medal, finishing four points clear of Divya T.S. of Karnataka, who took the silver with a score of 32.

Anjali Choudhary bagged the bronze with a score of 28, while Olympian Rhythm Sangwan finished fourth. In a tough qualification round, Manu finished fourth with 581, while Divya topped with a score of 587. Anjali shot 582, while Sangwan scored 579. Fresh from her gold-winning achievement at the elite season-ending World Cup Final in Doha, 21-year-old Simranpreet continued her impressive run, shooting 39 to claim the gold in the junior women's 25m pistol event.

Dwaram Pranavi won silver, while Palak of Haryana took the bronze. The junior qualification round was topped by Parisha Gupta, with Simranpreet coming in second with 578. Palak (575) finished third, while Pranavi shot 572. The 25m pistol team gold was clinched by Maharashtra with a combined score of 1726 (Shital Preetam Desai 577, Abhidnya Ashok Patil 575 and Rahi Sarnobat 574). —*PTI*

Kabaddi player critical after being shot at in Mohali

CHANDIGARH, 15 DEC

A kabaddi player-cum-promoter was critically injured after unidentified gunmen opened fire on him when he arrived with his team to take part in a tournament in Mohali on Monday, police said.

"Kabaddi player Rana Balachauria sustained bullet injuries in the incident. He was critically injured and was rushed to a private hospital in Mohali," SSP Harmandeep Singh Hans said.

The incident took place at Sohana in Mohali, where a private kabaddi tournament had been going on for the past few days. The SSP told reporters that the assailants were 2-3 in number and fled on a motorcycle after the incident. Some eyewitnesses told police that the attackers approached Rana to click selfies but opened fire soon after. The tournament was being held in a packed ground, where a noted Punjabi singer was also expected for the evening matches to give away prizes, they said.

When Rana reached the ground, he was stopped by the attackers, who requested a selfie."We first thought firecrackers were being burst," an eyewitness said, referring to the gunshots. To scare the spectators, the attackers also fired in the air, he said. —*PTI*

LALIGA

Real's 'unity' on display in win over Alaves

LONDON, 15 DEC

Xabi Alonso praised the "unity" of his Real Madrid team after a 2-1 LaLiga win at Alavés, which eased some of the pressure on the under-fire coach.

Kylian Mbappé put Madrid ahead in the first half at Mendizorroza, and Carlos Vicente levelled for the hosts after the break, before Rodrygo scored a late winner, with Vinícius Júnior providing the assist.

The victory left Madrid four points behind rivals Barcelona at the top of the table, after a disappointing run of results including three league draws and a loss to Celta Vigo led club executives to discuss Alonso's future.

Alonso's relationship with Vinícius has been scrutinised since the star forward's angry reaction at being substituted in October's Clásico, but the pair hugged after the Brazil star was taken off late in the Alavés game.

"We're all together, we're fighting together in the good moments and not so good moments," Alonso said in his post-match news conference. "The team fought well.

The start was perfect, and we were able to resume at the end. Unity is fundamental. Madrid now has two more matches before the Christmas break, visiting Talavera de la Reina in the Copa del Rey on Wednesday, before hosting Sevilla in LaLiga next weekend. —*PTI*

Harmer, India's Verma named ICC Players of the Month

DUBAI, 15 DEC

South African spinner Simon Harmer beat Bangladesh's Taijul Islam and Pakistan all-rounder Mohammad Nawaz to be named the ICC Men's Player of the Month for the first time.

The 36-year-old received the honours after taking an incredible combined haul of 17 wickets in the two-match ICC World Test Championship series to help South Africa to a comprehensive two-nil victory, their first Test series victory in India in 25 years. He returned figures of four for 30 and four for 21 in the series opener in Kolkata, followed by three for 64 and a staggering six for 37 in the second match in Guwahati, ending the series with an average of 8.94 and an economy of 1.91. Shafali Verma beat out Thipatcha Putthawong from Thailand and Esha Oza from the UAE for her first-ever Player of the Month award. Her success is made all the sweeter because she was drafted into the Indian Women's World Cup squad as a late replacement for an injured Pratika.She scored an excellent 87 from 78 deliveries the highest by an Indian opening batter in a Women's World Cup Final. —*PTI*